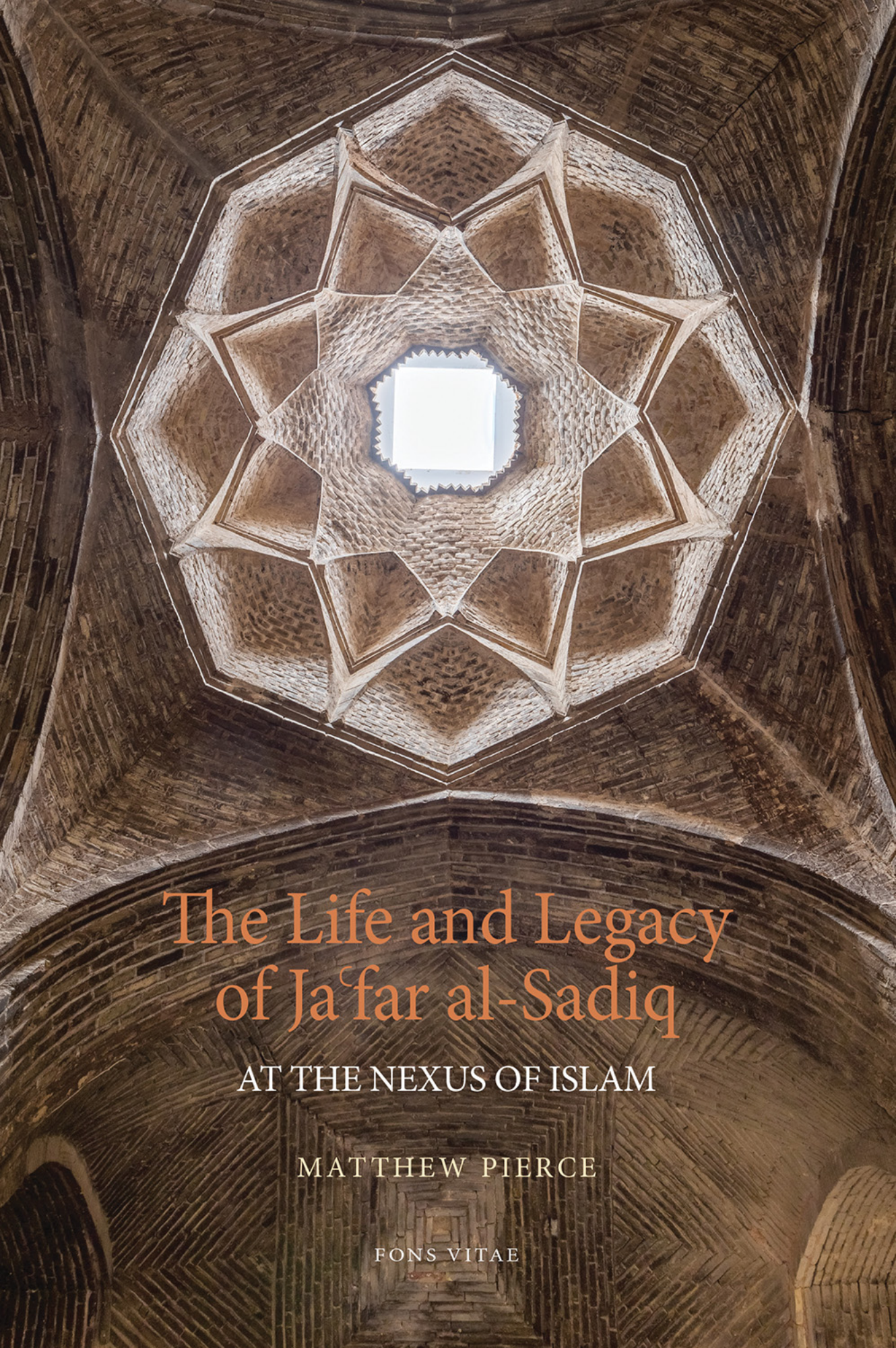

The Life and Legacy of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq

AT THE NEXUS OF ISLAM

MATTHEW PIERCE

FONS VITAE

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At the Nexus of Islam

by

Matthew Pierce

FONS VITAE

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Note on Transliteration and Citations

I have sought to make this book as accessible and useful to general audiences as possible. To make the text less cumbersome, I have removed all diacritical marks on Arabic words and kept citations of sources to a minimum. A key to the bracketed shorthand references within the text can be found at the end of the book, along with a suggested reading list for those wishing to learn more about the topics. I have made an effort to utilize and quote from sources that have been translated into English to enable those paths of further inquiry for readers without Arabic knowledge. This does result in some inconsistency regarding translation and transliteration styles. Where there is no English translation cited, I have used my own translations.

Matthew Pierce

Introduction: Stories and History

> So begin your morning with God and with Him draw your evening to a close. For whoever has his beginning with God and his end with Him will not be troubled in what lies between the two.
>
> Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, *Gems,* 116

On an autumn evening in 749, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq faced a decision that could shape the course of history. According to one famed account, a messenger had arrived at Jaʿfar's home in Medina, carrying updates on a revolution poised to topple the Umayyad Dynasty. The southern Iraqi city of Kufa had just fallen, and other cities seemed likely to slip from Umayyad control at any time. The messenger and his fellow travelers had arrived under the cover of night in a politically charged moment full of uncertainty--but also of hope. Jaʿfar's family and friends had long found fault with the Umayyad government, and many of them had paid dearly for that stance.

The Umayyads had risen to power nearly a century earlier in a bloody civil war that, in 661, culminated in the assassination of one of the Muslim community's greatest leaders, ʿAli ibn Abi Talib.

Jaʿfar himself was a descendant of ʿAli and his wife Fatima, the esteemed daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. The couple and their children – Hasan, Husayn, and Zaynab – were the Prophet's closest family members, and they were respected and revered by nearly all who followed the Prophet's teachings. ʿAli's descendants and their families, the ʿAlids, were consistently at odds with the Umayyad dynasty throughout its reign. Many ʿAlid leaders lost their lives in open rebellion against the Umayyads, or because they were suspected of plotting against the dynasty. The stories of injustices endured by Muhammad's descendants garnered sympathy among Muslims throughout the empire, and those communal memories served as reference points for all those who had grievances against the government. Jaʿfar, just shy of fifty years old at

the time of the messenger's arrival, had grown up in this atmosphere, living under the constant scrutiny of Umayyad authorities as he prepared to succeed his father as an important leader of the Prophet's family.

The messenger who came to Jaʿfar that evening was sent by a man named Abu Salama, a wealthy financier of the revolution. Abu Salama was also in charge of propaganda, and he had helped present the revolution as a movement that would put the Prophet's family back into power. That promise tapped into an amorphous and wide-ranging yearning of the time: a hope that a descendant of the Prophet would appear to restore justice and provide authentic Islamic leadership. The revolutionary leaders, however, had not made clear who would take on that role.

Despite its incredible successes, the revolution had suffered a recent setback. Ibrahim, a man groomed to be the leader and first caliph of the new dynasty, had been killed. Abu Salama needed a new figurehead lest the movement be derailed. The men at Jaʿfar's home bore a letter that had the potential to alter the destiny of the ʿAlids: a call for Jaʿfar to be the leader of the revolution and the caliph of the new government. Jaʿfar was an obvious choice in many respects. He was one of the most prominent descendants of the Prophet, his knowledge of religion was vast, and his pedigree and reputation were impeccable. If Jaʿfar agreed to Abu Salama's proposal, he would become one of the most powerful men in the world, a man who could determine the mold of Islamic society for years to come. It would have been an incredibly alluring opportunity; indeed, many among his family had died trying to attain such a role.

Jaʿfar read the letter. He then turned to his guests and said calmly, "What do I have to do with Abu Salama? He is no follower of mine" [Masʿudi, IV: 97]. But the messenger was undeterred and pressed Jaʿfar for an answer he could take back to Abu Salama. In response, Jaʿfar asked that a lamp be brought to him. As Abu Salama's envoy watched, Jaʿfar put the letter to the flame, holding it there until it disintegrated into ash. Jaʿfar had made up his mind: he wanted nothing of this revolution.

This story, recorded primarily by the famed 10th century historian al-Masʿudi, is not just a captivating vignette providing texture to the larger narrative of the ʿAbbasid revolution. The account also exemplifies the challenge of recording historically accurate descriptions of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. Simply, the story above is impossible to verify

and equally impossible to disprove. So what are we to do with such narratives? Assembling every story that *could* have happened would leave us with an incoherent and contradictory mess that would be of little use or interest to most readers. On the other hand, excluding all accounts which cannot be verified would leave us with an empty page and effectively erase Jaʿfar's legacy entirely. But did Jaʿfar really receive a message from Abu Salama one evening inviting him to be the caliph of the ʿAbbasid revolution? Did Jaʿfar actually burn the letter, if there even was one? While it may be impossible to confirm this particular story, there can be little doubt, based on the larger body of evidence, that Jaʿfar was an extremely viable candidate to claim the right to lead the community and, furthermore, that he would have certainly had significant support. The story of the letter helps illustrate the broader – and more certain – point that Jaʿfar chose not to seek such an office [Modarressi, 35-42]. He opted for a life of scholarship and reflection on the inner meanings of human existence in light of divine revelation.

The many stories of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq that have been passed down are not only difficult to individually verify, but they also cannot be easily reconciled with one another. His life has been recalled and utilized in contradictory ways to support disparate points of view for many centuries. It is arguably impossible to see the life of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq without viewing him through the lens of historical developments that occurred after his life, events that shaped the lives of the generations who recorded the stories about him. Over time, Jaʿfar's name came to be most commonly associated with Shiʿa Muslim traditions. Further, for many Shiʿa Muslims today, Jaʿfar is considered one of the most important people in all of history. When Jaʿfar is discussed at all by Sunni Muslims today he is also typically associated with Shiʿism, unless the discussion is within a Sufi order. Sufis, groups of Muslims (including Sunni and Shiʿa) devoted to Islamic spirituality and mysticism, have typically remembered Jaʿfar with great reverence. A brief survey into the literature on Jaʿfar al-Sadiq makes it clear that his legacy was shaped by these factional identities of later history, whereas Jaʿfar himself lived before there was a concept of a Sunni identity, before Muslim mystics organized themselves into Sufi orders, and before Shiʿism was a distinct branch of Islam.

There were divisions among the Muslims of Jaʿfar's generation, but those divisions had yet to coalesce into the branches of

Islam that we know today. And even after those divisions emerged, Jaʿfar's life was revered by nearly every group, Sunni and Shiʿa, Sufi and non-Sufi. He was a part of a generation of Muslim leaders and teachers that may have done more to shape the direction of Islamic history than any other generation since. He stands at the very nexus of early Islamic thought. And yet, despite his widespread appeal, Jaʿfar will always be tied to the legacy built around him by later generations that used him to make their own unique claims and legitimize their own traditions.

This book considers Jaʿfar's contributions to early Islamic thought. The complexities and challenges entailed in that task are rich opportunities to clarify and nuance our general understanding of the intellectual context of early Islam. But to do that, we must acknowledge that nearly every claim about his life, his teachings, or his impact is contested by multiple parties in diverse ways for divergent reasons. As I discuss, his teachings likely did more to shape Shiʿism than the teachings of any other figure besides the Prophet Muhammad. The dominant Twelver Shiʿa tradition of jurisprudence is referred to as the Jaʿfari school precisely because of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's influence on it, or at least the importance of claiming his authority within it. His legacy, however, extends far beyond the boundaries of Shiʿism. I show how mainstream Sunni scholars have drawn upon his teachings, and why Sufi orders around the world count him as a formative figure in the development of Islamic spirituality and mysticism. Furthermore, groups considered heretical by both mainstream Sunni and Shiʿa leaders have also drawn upon teachings ascribed to Jaʿfar. The significance of Jaʿfar to so many diverse groups, however, only complicates the historical record, resulting in competing, and sometimes irreconcilable, claims about his teachings. Sorting out the apocryphal from the authentic Jaʿfar is inevitably an interpretive task.

Jaʿfar the Truthful

Jaʿfar does not appear to have been afraid of the limelight, and he was no stranger to controversy. He took his role as a leader seriously, devoting himself to his followers and offering himself to students of all kinds. Political power, however, was not his goal. His was a different vision of authority: a leadership rooted in knowledge and spiritual discipline. His striving for these earned him the epithet al-Sadiq, the Truthful.

The revolution that toppled the Umayyad Dynasty in 750 was not the first uprising whose participants had sought Jaʿfar's support. Throughout his life, he declined many opportunities to lead political movements. In some respects, it seems that Jaʿfar had little need for the power such movements promised, for his character and pedigree earned him broad, cross-factional respect. He was a direct descendent of the Prophet in a cultural context in which lineage was exceedingly important. Those who lacked honorable ancestors had little status and struggled to earn respect and trust. New converts to Islam, for example, were expected to formally affiliate themselves with a member of the Arab Muslim aristocracy, creating a type of fictive kinship within a tribe. Arab pride in tribal and clan affiliation left little room for social advancement outside of that system. By becoming an affiliate, a non-Arab convert to Islam could be integrated into a tribe and share in some of its honor.

Those who had the good fortune of being born into a family with an honorable reputation faced immense pressure to maintain family honor and prestige. The social consequences of bringing shame to the family could ripple across generations. In Jaʿfar's context, nothing was as prestigious as being a member of the Prophet's family, and to this day, most Muslim communities around the world continue to hold descendants of the Prophet in high regard. Jaʿfar was a direct descendant of Husayn, one of the Prophet's two grandsons, and, indeed, for the first ten years of Jaʿfar's life, he lived in the company of his grandfather ʿAli Zayn al-ʿAbidin, the son of Husayn. This grandfather had been one of the only male survivors of the family's greatest catastrophe: the killing of Husayn and his followers at Karbalaʾ in the year 680. Jaʿfar's grandfather had witnessed the Umayyad massacre of his father, uncles, and cousins in one of the most tragic events of Islamic history. This humiliation of the Prophet's descendants had a profound impact on Jaʿfar's grandfather. He refrained from involving himself in politics, an approach his son and grandson also adopted. After Karbalaʾ, few remained to carry on the traditions of the Prophet's family, and from an early age, Jaʿfar knew that the community was counting on him.

Jaʿfar was also the product of another prestigious family line. His mother, Umm Farwa, was the daughter of al-Qasim ibn Muhammad, one of the most influential and widely respected leaders of the community of believers in Medina. Counted among the famed

Seven Jurists of Medina, al-Qasim was part of a core group of scholars who shaped the direction of early Islamic legal thought. He was also the grandson of Abu Bakr, the first caliph of Islam and one of the Prophet's closest friends. When the Prophet Muhammad had died in 632, the Muslim community was divided over whether Abu Bakr or ʿAli ibn Abi Talib should succeed the Prophet as leader of the community. Each was respected, and each was beloved by the Prophet. Jaʿfar al-Sadiq was a direct descendant of both men.

Jaʿfar was committed to safeguarding the legacy and traditions passed on to him. Through teaching and discipleship, his father had established himself as one of the most learned ʿAlid leaders, and Jaʿfar was his father's prized student. He devoted himself to his education, mastering complex religious material at an early age and proving himself a worthy successor to his father. In stark contrast to the opulence of the Umayyad rulers and the rumored debauchery associated with court life, Jaʿfar supported his family through farmng and trade. Though he was serious and frugal in his approach to finances, he helped build upon his family's reputation of humility, charity, and discipline [Modarressi, 21-34]. This was the legacy of the family of the Prophet that Jaʿfar devoted his life to maintaining and passing on to his descendants and followers.

A Turning Point in History

It is hard to overstate the significance of the historical developments in the region that took place in Jaʿfar's era. In the decades leading up to his birth, Arab tribes had experienced an unprecedented rise to power, wresting control of vast regions that had once belonged to the Byzantine and Persian empires. By Jaʿfar's lifetime, Arab rule spanned from the Iberian Peninsula to the Indus River valley, with the unifying message of the Prophet Muhammad providing the outlines of a new vision for an irrevocably changed world. The Persian Empire had collapsed, and the Byzantine Empire was seriously diminished. Tensions between Rome and Constantinople were at an all-time high, and the papacy had little influence over a deeply fractured Europe. Only the Tang Dynasty of East Asia came close to rivaling the new Arab polity. The Umayyad Empire was the largest the world had ever seen.

The Arab rise to power has long been conceptualized as a series of Islamic conquests, but as the new empire took shape, Islam as a religion was still in a formative state. Muhammad's message

had united tribes in 7th century Arabia and provided an ethic of cooperation that made conquest possible, but the historical circumstances of the conquests played an enormous and formative role in shaping Islamic tradition. Moreover, Muslims understood their religion in immensely varied ways from the outset, despite being unified in their commitment to Muhammad's prophecy.

Jaʿfar was raised in Medina, the city of the Prophet, where Muhammad spent the final decade of his life. Far from the ruling courts of Damascus and the battlegrounds of the frontiers, Medina was a relatively quiet town where the memory of Muhammad loomed large. Even by the early 8th century, many of the formative institutions of Islamic thought and practice had yet to be established. The Qurʾan was generally agreed to be the foundation of Islamic thought, but few of the religious assumptions that would later shape classical Islamic teachings had been settled. Religious identities were in flux, and the relationships between Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim, and between Islam and other religions was openly contested. Specific rules governing essential rites like prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage were still being debated, and the interpretive methods used by later Muslim scholars to navigate complicated questions had not been developed. No single authoritative record of the Prophet's life existed, and many of the stories about him contradicted one another. Even at the height of Umayyad power, prominent Muslim leaders questioned the entire political edifice that had been erected in the name of Islam, especially as political power had become increasingly controlled by wealthy leaders of the Umayyad clan. In contrast, a growing number of ascetic hermits, pious teachers and non-Arab converts to Islam challenged the ethical underpinnings of the Arab Muslim ruling elite. Many felt the need for religious and political guidance that would bring stability and coherence in an uncertain time.

Indeed, a crisis of political and religious authority loomed at this formative moment of early Islamic history. The Umayyad dynasty's right to rule was regularly challenged, and the authority of the caliphs as Islamic leaders was often questioned. Who had the right and the ability to determine how Islamic ideals should be applied? Did a given caliph have the authority to dictate the teachings of Islam, or was he subject to the views of scholars more knowledgeable of the Prophet's way of life? This complex and contentious issue was in urgent need of resolution. A sentiment was

growing, especially among new converts who felt that Arab tribal politics were overshadowing religious teachings, that the Prophet's descendants were the best and most authentic guides for the community. This deference to the Prophet's family was a powerful force that ultimately contributed to the downfall of the Umayyad Dynasty. Within a century of the Umayyad collapse, new scholarly disciplines of legal thought, scriptural hermeneutics, and theology had coalesced. The cultural and intellectual flourishing known as the classical period of Islam was dawning.

Some claim that after turning down the invitation to lead the revolution of 750, Jaʿfar received another invitation to become leader of the new dynasty. He declined all such requests, and by the time of his death in 765, he had held no political office. Jaʿfar was buried alongside his father and grandfather in Medina, and his followers were deeply divided over who would carry on his legacy and lead the ʿAlid families. The new caliphs that took power were not descendants of the Prophet as many had hoped, though they were part of the Prophet's clan. The emergent empire became known as the ʿAbbasid Dynasty, because its caliphs were descendants of the Prophet's uncle, ʿAbbas. The change in leadership appeased some of those who were discontented with Umayyad rule, but ʿAlid loyalists were dissatisfied.

By considering the ways in which Jaʿfar's life and teachings shaped Islamic thought, we gain insight into Islam as it was lived and practiced before sectarian categories were firmly in place. At the very time that Muslim scholars were sketching out the boundaries and consolidating the teachings of different traditions within the faith, Jaʿfar helped ensure that the moral vision of Muhammad and the inner secrets of the Qurʾan were not lost.

Types of Early Sources Available

The reality of unreliable sources poses challenges for modern historians attempting to identify what accounts may be trustworthy. There is no shortage of historical sources that speak about the life and teachings of Jaʿfar. They come in a variety of genres of medieval writing. Scattered references to him can be found in most chronicles written by medieval Muslim historians. Some of Jaʿfar's teachings are found in various Sunni legal texts, including most major hadith collections. Sufi mystical writings of the classical period frequently reference him, especially commenting on his piety

and his esoteric interpretations of the Qurʾan. And centuries of alchemists rarely failed to credit him with ideas and insights in their treatises. However, by far the most extensive historical records on Jaʿfar comes from Shiʿa Muslim traditions. Both of the two largest branches of Shiʿa Islam, Ismaʿili and Twelver, have preserved extensive accounts about Jaʿfar, as have more controversial Muslim groups such as the Nusayris. I explain the role of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq in these traditions more thoroughly in subsequent chapters, but the accounts about him in Shiʿa traditions are typically scattered across a wide range of religious works and treatises on nearly every subject imaginable.

There are numerous manuscripts which exist in libraries around the world which are said to be copies of books authored by Jaʿfar al-Sadiq himself. If Jaʿfar composed any of these books, they would obviously be ideal for helping reconstruct his ideas and opinions. One of the more famous books that has been credited to Jaʿfar is a short thematic collection of ethical advice called *Lantern of the Path* (*Misbah al-shariʿa*). It has twenty-four chapters on a range of topics from social etiquette to how to avoid vices and enrich one's spiritual life. The slim book has been translated into English, but there are some who doubt that it is a work of Jaʿfar himself since, like all other books attributed to him, the manuscripts of the book are of uncertain origin.

Another famous text associated with Jaʿfar is frequently referred to as the *Book of Jafr* (*Kitab al-Jafr*). The term *jafr* has no relation to Jaʿfar's name. Rather, the term is commonly used for the process of divination and fortunetelling, though the term can also refer to a kind of leather. Some have claimed that this book was referred to as the *Book of Jafr* on account of its leather encasing. Regardless, a long history of references to the mysterious *Book of Jafr* exists, especially in Shiʿa and various alchemist and occult circles. According to most of those accounts, it was a book that contained ancient mysteries and divine secrets that had been passed down to various prophets and eventually came to the Prophet Muhammad and then ʿAli b. Abi Talib. The latter was said to have passed it down to his descendants and Shiʿa sources often make note of it as a book that each imam afterwards kept in their possession. But a wide range of traditions also specifically attribute the book to Jaʿfar, sometimes clarifying that he added extensive notations and additions to the book. But here again, there are no reliable manu-

scripts of this book that can be traced to Jaʿfar and many scholars have considered the rumors of such a book to be more lore than history.

Dozens of additional works attributed to Jaʿfar exist in manuscript form or were said to have existed in the past but may have been lost in history. Many of the works whose manuscripts do remain intact are very short and often overlap with one another. There are small collections of spiritual advice, prayers, medicinal tips, and mystical teachings. None of them, however, have gained widespread acceptance as authentic works by Jaʿfar. On the other hand, it's equally difficult to prove that any of these writings are not authentic – there's simply too little evidence to draw a conclusion.

The situation is not surprising for most historians of the period. Very few writings have survived by scholars of the early or mid-eighth century. Teachers in Jaʿfar's day often preferred to orally convey their teachings rather than attempting to author books separate from their lectures. It was another century before it became common practice for Muslim scholars to pen their own works to be distributed beyond their immediate students. It's likely, therefore, that we may be able to locate some of Jaʿfar's authentic teachings in the works of his students, or later generations of his students, even if the transmission process likely adds additional layers of interpretation and interpolation.

One interesting example of a book by one of Jaʿfar's students is an extensive account of Jaʿfar's advice to al-Mufaddal ibn ʿUmar. In a work that has historically been given different names, but which has been published as *Tawhid al-Mufaddal*, Jaʿfar's student seeks help in responding to atheist denials of the existence of God. The treatise, ostensibly written by al-Mufaddal who copied down Jaʿfar's advice to him, is essentially a defense of theism based on a variety of reflections upon the wonders of creation. A rough English translation of this work can be found under the title *Tradition of Mufaddal*, though some scholars have raised serious doubts about the book's origin and authorship.

If we look for collections of Jaʿfar's teachings by even later generations of authors, there are many more sources to consider. Ironically, it may be these works of scholars long after Jaʿfar, who never knew him personally, that have preserved some of the most accurate accounts of his teachings. The custom of passing down traditions of thought and commentary from teacher to student con-

tinued for many centuries and numerous later scholars claimed to record some of the teachings of Jaʿfar that had been previously only orally conveyed or copied down on informal notes. But again, we're left to speculate immensely. Numerous works which claim to preserve material from Jaʿfar's students rarely contain any detailed information about how that material was passed down from one scholar to the next. For example, *Tafsir al-imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq*, a commentary of the Qurʾan dating to the tenth century, is said to contain Jaʿfar's glosses of the sacred scripture. But little else is known about the work or how it was transmitted. The same can be said for a famous collection of wisdom sayings which claim to have been passed down from Jaʿfar. This latter work was published as *Jaʿfari Wisdom Sayings* (*al-Hikam al-Jaʿfariya*).

Occasionally there were authors who provided more information about their own sources. In at least one instance, an early 11th century scholar collected commentaries on the Qurʾan passed down from Jaʿfar, among others, and gave fairly clear accounts of where he gathered those accounts. Dr. Gerhard Böwering, a contemporary scholar of Islamic history, has looked at these commentaries of the Qurʾan collected and annotated by the famous Abu ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Sulami. While there remain strong possibilities that small changes in wording or phrases occurred over time as the material was passed down, Böwering suggests the Qurʾan commentaries that al-Sulami records of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq likely preserve a fairly reliable glimpse into Jaʿfar's teachings [Böwering, 65]. Selections from what al-Sulami collected of Jaʿfar's commentaries have been translated into English by Farhana Mayer in *Spiritual Gems: The Mystical Qurʾān Commentary Ascribed to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq*.

The Problem of Sectarianism

With some critical inquiry, it's possible to select a few sources that are more likely reliable than others. These sources can then serve as a starting point for understanding Jaʿfar's life and thought. Unfortunately, there are more disruptive issues at play that have to be considered. The scholarly success and renowned reputation that Jaʿfar achieved in his life (and through his legacy later) made him an incredibly powerful source to cite in favor of one's own position. Any doctrine that subsequent generations of scholars might want to champion could be imbued with authority and authenticity if it was credited to Jaʿfar. Like many great leaders and think-

ers of history, his legacy has been shaped and exploited for a wide variety of purposes and agendas.

As Muslim mystical groups began to take on some institutional shape, for example, tracing their lineage of authoritative guides through Jaʿfar had obvious advantages. Jaʿfar's reputation as a master of esoteric interpretation and an interpreter of secret mysteries of the divine realities gave the entire domain of esotericism added legitimacy. Jaʿfar's impeccable family pedigree, scholarly credentials, and distance from any specific political movements were just the combination of qualities that later Sufi mystics often sought. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Jaʿfar is often credited with Sufi terms and theories that only developed in subsequent centuries, long after the lifetime of Jaʿfar. There is good reason, therefore, to pause before we take those later claims for granted.

The flowering of later Sufi thought isn't the only historical development that has been projected anachronistically onto Jaʿfar's life. The unique disruptions and complications to Jaʿfar's legacy are most poignantly tied to later Sunni and Shiʿa rivalries. While the shiʿism of Jaʿfar's day (which I indicate throughout this book with lower case "s") may have enjoyed widespread sympathy, and Jaʿfar's leadership within the ʿAlid families was respected by most Muslim communities at the time, later Ismaʿili and Twelver Shiʿisms (capital "S") of subsequent generations came to be seen by many later "Sunni" Muslim leaders as dangerous heterodoxies. By the 12th century, there was a fairly common sense of Sunni and Shiʿa forms of Islam being distinct and antithetical to one another, though there are an abundance of examples of that boundary being blurred throughout Islamic history. The legacy of Jaʿfar was a contested arena within the new sectarian divide. And while Shiʿa communities clearly staked far more substantial claims on Jaʿfar, both Sunni and Shiʿa communities attempted to fashion his legacy in various ways to fit their needs.

For most Shiʿa communities, Jaʿfar is a pivotal figure of critical significance in the realms of doctrine, law, and theology. A couple of observations can be made about the way Jaʿfar's legacy fit into Shiʿa narratives of history. First of all, it became axiomatic that no Shiʿa doctrines could contradict the teachings of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. It would simply be unthinkable. Not only would the majority of later Shiʿa communities generally agree that the imams were infallible, or divinely protected from error in some degree, but Jaʿfar's

reputation as a scholar gave the institution of the imamate added credibility. This entire system of thought would be undermined if it contradicted the teachings of Jaʿfar. Second, Shiʿa doctrines of all types could be given stronger weight if they were attached to the authority of Jaʿfar. Not only could Shiʿa doctrines not contradict Jaʿfar, finding a way to root doctrines in the teachings of Jaʿfar was extra advantageous.

This should not lead us to assume Shiʿa doctrines developed in perfect harmony with all of Jaʿfar's teachings. Like Sufi orders that projected some of their own teachings back onto Jaʿfar to gain credibility, the same tendency existed for Shiʿa scholars as well. But Sufi orders and Shiʿa apologists were not the only ones guilty of exploiting Jaʿfar's legacy. Instances of various Sunni leaders doing the same can be found as well.

Although Sunni communities, especially those unaffiliated with Sufi orders, generally had less at stake in the legacy of Jaʿfar, there were still rhetorical agendas at play in how he was remembered by later Sunni scholars. As I explain in chapter two, many Sunni scholars simply began to avoid accounts attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. Even though he was generally seen as a trustworthy and authoritative individual, Jaʿfar was increasingly associated with Shiʿism, especially Twelver Shiʿism. As a kind of Sunni orthodoxy began to coalesce in the 11th and 12th centuries, references to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq could raise suspicion of secret loyalty to Shiʿism. On the other hand, some Sunni apologists used the legacy of Jaʿfar to gain advantage, citing Jaʿfar in ways that seemed to explicitly refute Shiʿism. Only while rejecting Shiʿism would citing the authority of Jaʿfar be completely safe for some Sunni defenders. Such a rhetorical strategy was quite powerful. However, these instances of later Sunni writers using stories of Jaʿfar to criticique Shiʿism force us to grapple again with the problem of unreliable sources.

One of the most central and oft-debated points of contention between medieval Sunni and Shiʿa doctrines was over whether Abu Bakr or ʿAli was the rightful inheritor of the Prophet's leadership over the community. Interestingly, one short book of uncertain origin that has been attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq was *al-Sadiq's Debate Comparing the Merits Abu Bakr and ʿAli* (*Munazarat al-Sadiq fi tafdil bayna Abi Bakr wa-ʿAli*). In it, Jaʿfar is said to have articulated and defended the notion that Abu Bakr was in fact greater and more deserving of leadership than ʿAli. Such a position directly contradict-

ed core Shiʿa doctrines. Having someone like Jaʿfar as the source for anti-Shiʿism was clearly a polemical strategy for purposes of debate. An even more telling example of a Sunni polemical use of Jaʿfar is the 11th century work, *Jaʿfar b. Muhammad al-Sadiq's Debate with the Shiʿa Heretics* (*Munazara Jaʿfar b. Muhammad al-Sadiq maʿa-l-rafidi*), which presents al-Sadiq providing an extensive point by point case against Shiʿism. Though not all Sunni citations of Jaʿfar reflect this sectarian tension, it is not uncommon to find texts that simultaneously worked to restore Jaʿfar's legacy within Sunni circles while also providing strategic resources in disputes with Shiʿa scholars who relied so heavily on Jaʿfar's authority.

A Pathway Forward

It should be clear by this point what a delicate and challenging task it is to attempt to tell the story of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. And while many Muslims today are not directly invested in the sectarian debates that relate to Jaʿfar's legacy, any assertions about Jaʿfar's life will inevitably become part of those debates. But these challenges are not new to most historians, especially historians of religion. Nearly all figures of religious, political, or cultural significance are shrouded in contested claims of rival groups and interpretations. The challenge is how to responsibly make sense of the variety of sources about Jaʿfar's life in relationship to what we know about this historical context.

The most rigorous methods used by historians to gauge reliability of specific accounts often revolve around analysis of how stories and texts were transmitted. With any given story about Jaʿfar, for example, questions arise regarding how that information was received and passed on to an author of a text. As noted above, the vast majority of sources on Jaʿfar's life have uncertain chains of transmission. It becomes nearly impossible, therefore, to mark many of the sources as more reliable than another in any consistent manner. If we are going to say much of anything about Jaʿfar's life, therefore, we must draw loosely upon broader strategies to help us sort through the conflicting representations.

In my own research of Jaʿfar's life, I have leaned on several principles that have shaped the way I have come to understand Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. None of these principles are foolproof and they still require significant levels of interpretation on the part of the historian. First and foremost, I have tried to keep in mind that Jaʿfar

was a man of his times. It may appear self-ovbious to emphasize that aspects of his life and teachings that were common at the time shouldn't surprise us. And, of course, this is not to discount that he may have been unique in certain respects or a forerunner of specific ideas. But when accounts of his life are mainly at odds with later customs or sensibilities, we should take the time to consider his context before discounting them. For example, given the sharp division between some later Sunni and Shiʿa scholarly circles, it may be surprising that Jaʿfar is said to have studied with and taught many students who had no known connection to the shiʿa perspective. As I emphasize throughout, however, the boundaries between the shiʿa followers of the Prophet's family and other Muslims was not a clear or distinct divide at the time of Jaʿfar. The accounts of his interactions with non-shiʿa teachers and students, therefore, are entirely plausible and were common in his time.

Another observation that can serve as a guide to piecing together Jaʿfar's life is that accounts of his general public actions are actually more widely agreed upon by various groups than the specifics of his private teachings. For example, there is little room to doubt that Jaʿfar had opportunities to lead popular revolutionary movements with many supporters ready to follow him. That he is well known for turning down these opportunities gives us a firm basis from which to think about his political positions and broadly understand his general priorities and concerns.

Similarly, we can add that where divergent groups of Jaʿfar's followers agreed on aspects of his teachings, there is reason to consider those aspects to be more likely reliable than items upon which they differ. I rely upon this approach for understanding Jaʿfar's legal contributions. Identifying those common claims among divergent groups also gives us some confidence, for example, in accepting that Jaʿfar did indeed emphasize the importance of following a spiritual guide. That various groups understand that guide in different ways only underscores the probability that Jaʿfar emphasized the importance of a guide.

And yet even questions around which his followers differed can give us some helpful indications about his teachings. When those who were clearly committed to his teachings did not agree, it is likely that Jaʿfar offered no clear direction. Again, this too can't be taken as a certainty, but it does help us, for example, set aside some of the unique projections of later groups. If Jaʿfar had clearly

taught that there would be a series of twelve imams, for example, with the twelfth being the mahdi, it is unlikely that so many of his children and committed devotees would have failed to understand such a teaching.

Each of these issues related are explored topically in subsequent chapters. In this book, I have not attempted to tell a chronological story of Jaʿfar's life from childhood to his death. The historical sources available to us do not make such a detailed narrative realistic without taking a turn into the genre of historical fiction. Throughout the book, rather, I attempt to summarize what we know about his historical and intellectual context in relation to specific aspects of his life and influence. In the first chapter, "Revolutions and Loyalties," I summarize some of the main political and religious debates of the early 8th century that provide essential context for understanding Jaʿfar's broad approach to the division of his day. In the second chapter, "A Teacher of Teachers," I discuss the most widely agreed upon aspect of Jaʿfar's life, his public role as a teacher of tradition. There, I attempt to highlight his relationships with, and similarities to, other formative Sunni teachers of law at the time. Chapter three, "Searching the Inner Secrets," surveys the specific teachings of Jaʿfar that likely had the most profound impact, especially for later Sufi traditions – his teachings on spirituality and esoteric readings of the Qur'an. In the final chapter, "An Imam for the Shiʿa," I summarize the divergent ways in which Jaʿfar's legacy has been shaped by Shiʿa traditions of later generations.

It is true that we remain in the dark about many details of Jaʿfar's life and must hold most of our claims about him with some level of caution. But by keeping some of these general principles in mind as we survey the many accounts about Jaʿfar, we can develop a general image of his life. Documenting how he was unique among his peers is more challenging, though I make suggestions in that direction in each chapter. They must be read as interpretive claims, not certain conclusions. Dogmatic assertions about the real Jaʿfar are folly and cannot be substantiated in a historically consistent matter.

Ultimately, it is not my goal in this book to present groundbreaking research or to develop novel insights into the life of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. Rather, my hope is to collect some of what we know about the life of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, or at least what has been claimed about

him, and situate that within the intellectual developments of his day. I have tried to do this in way that avoids jargon and will provide general readers and non-specialists a better understanding of both early Islamic history and Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's legacy. At the end of each chapter, I have gathered a representative sampling of sayings and teachings attributed to Jaʿfar by various groups. Although none of the individual quotes can be verified with confidence, they collectively provide the reader with a taste of the kinds of approaches and concerns Jaʿfar likely provided in his teachings.

A man like Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, who lived a relatively quiet life and kept revolutions at arm's length, might be easy to overlook. Historians tend to focus on the politically powerful, and history books are full of kings and conquests. Tales of sultans and battles intrigue and entertain us, and the rise and fall of empires provides a helpful framework for organizing past eras. It is easy to come away from historical annals with the sense that politics and war are the greatest shaping factors in human societies. But how many of us believe that records of political and military elites today are the best source for insight into our own communities and our lives as individuals?

One of the most politically significant events in the early Islamic world occurred in Jaʿfar's lifetime, and he chose not to participate in it. As the Umayyads fell and the ʿAbbasids rose to prominence, Jaʿfar devoted himself to theological and spiritual disciplines, exploring the Qurʾan and teaching students to live in an ethically complicated world. He was not a simple man, but he was committed to living a simple lifestyle devoted to God and humanity. His sincerity and devotion earned him widespread respect, and many of the next generation's most important leaders studied with him. His followers wrote books based on his lectures, and his insights shaped their writings. These works have been quoted, recycled, and repurposed in varied and surprising ways ever since.

Chapter I: Revolutions and Loyalties

> Do not abandon what you know to be certain within yourself for something heard from other people which you doubt.
>
> Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, *Lantern,* 24

Since Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's death in 765, his grave has served as a place of pilgrimage, prayer, and remembrance. He was buried near his father, grandfather, and many other members of the Prophet's family at one of the most sacred sites in Medina: Baqiʿ Cemetery. As centuries passed, domed shrines were built around the most important tombs, including those of Jaʿfar and his father. Pious pilgrims from around the world honored the life and legacy of Jaʿfar by visiting his shrine, often in conjunction with the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. That tradition was put on hold in 1806, however, when a new Saudi government had the shrines of Baqiʿ Cemetery razed to the ground. The demolition was inspired by the austere vision of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, an 18th-century reformer who had championed a strict interpretation of Islamic rituals – an interpretation commonly referred to as "Wahhabism." For those following this interpretation, nearly all popular expressions of devotion to saints was considered idolatry. For them, the shrines which marked the grave sites of past saints and revered descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, including that of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, had to be destroyed.

Wahhabi intolerance of certain religious rituals has never resonated with the majority of Muslims, and revered sites like the grave of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq have often been symbolic battlegrounds for competing claims of Islamic interpretation. After the 1806 destruction of Baqiʿ Cemetery, the Ottoman Empire regained control of the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina and rebuilt some of the shrines. The architecture built around these graves was testament to enduring and broad Muslim historical reverence for the figures buried there. A beautiful cupola covered the largest mausoleum in the restored cemetery, which contained the graves of Jaʿfar, his father Muham-

mad al-Baqir, his grandfather ʿAli Zayn al-ʿAbidin, and Hasan, the grandson of the Prophet. This Ottoman victory, however, was short-lived. When the empire collapsed in 1924, Saudi leaders regained control of the Prophet's city. Within two years, every building in the cemetery was reduced to rubble. To this day, Saudi policy has prevented memorials from being erected on the site, to the consternation of many Sunni and Shiʿa Muslims around the world.

Ottoman shrine at Baqiʿ (left) and the contemporary site of Baqiʿ (right)
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The legacy of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq highlights the divisions within Islam historically, as well some of the most enduring commonalities across Muslim traditions. His life was at the center of some of the most pressing and contentious issues that have faced Muslim communities, and stories about him often provide more information about the fault lines between Muslim identities than they do about the historical figure himself. Twelver Shiʿa Muslims and Ismaʿili Shiʿa Muslims, for example, differ in their understanding of Jaʿfar's religious teachings, even though both groups consider him a trusted imam. Sufi mystics and Wahhabi traditionalists disagree radically over their conceptions of Islamic rituals, but Jaʿfar is regarded as a reliable teacher by nearly all who fall into these two groups. In fact, few Muslim leaders of any school of thought have denied the piety and integrity of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. This type of cross-sectarian admiration for a figure other than the prophet is both rare and remarkable. It can be attributed both to the circumstances of his life and to the thoughtful way he navigated the issues of his day.

Political Debates of the Early 8th Century

A full picture of Jaʿfar does not begin at his birth. His life and legacy are inextricably tied to a range of early Muslim debates, both religious and political, that formed the background of his thinking and take us back to the origins of Islam. When the Prophet Muhammad died in 632, most of his followers assumed that a successor, or caliph (*khalifa*), would carry on the Prophet's authority in all matters related to religion, politics, and law. The identity of this successor, however, was a matter of disagreement. Ultimately Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law and close associate, was named the first caliph, but some believed that ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, had been cheated out of the position. This led to a rift in the community. ʿAli became the fourth caliph of Islam in 656, but the damage had been done. Resentment, Arab tribal rivalries, and disputes over policy and law plagued the new empire. Civil war broke out, consuming most of ʿAli's energies until his assassination five years later. The Banu Umayya, an Arab clan that had led the opposition to ʿAli, claimed the mantle of the Prophet and transformed the caliphate into a family dynasty – the Umayyads – based in Damascus.

Those who had remained loyal to ʿAli were known as the *shiʿat ʿAli*. These partisans of ʿAli were not Shiʿa Muslims in the later, sectarian sense, though the two are connected in important ways. At this early stage, the shiʿa supporters of ʿAli were simply those who defended his right to the caliphate and believed, in some cases, that he should have been the caliph immediately after the prophet's death. Most of these partisans believed that ʿAli's son Hasan was the rightful caliph after ʿAli's death. However, Hasan quickly signed a treaty ceding the caliphate to Muʿawiya, the first Umayyad ruler. Nonetheless, the partisans of ʿAli clung to hope that leadership of the Muslim community would someday return to the Prophet's family.

Jaʿfar al-Sadiq grew up in Medina at the height of Umayyad power. Internal power struggles plagued the dynasty throughout its existence, but the caliphate remained in the Umayyad family's hands. At the same time, major disputes surfaced outside the palace. The dynasty was fundamentally at odds with many Muslims' understanding of Muhammad's teachings. A hallmark of Muhammad's leadership had been uniting Arab tribes, but the Umayyad

system consolidated power within a single clan. Perceptions of the Umayyads as corrupt and self-serving were widespread and contradicted the vision that many had for Islamic authority.

One of the most egregious political mistakes made by the Umayyads, one which galvanized opposition to their authority from many corners of the empire, was their method of dealing with non-Arab converts to Islam. At Islam's inception, being Muslim also meant being Arab. Islam was the faith that united the Arab tribes and provided a moral vision for an expanding empire. Arab Muslims generally saw themselves as just rulers over non-Muslim lands, and in exchange for providing protection and security, Arab Muslim governors charged the populace a poll tax. Muslims, nearly all of whom were Arab, were exempt from this tax, though they were expected to make charitable contributions (*zakat*). The result of this arrangement, however, was that non-Muslims had a considerable financial incentive to convert to Islam. In addition to being released of the obligation to pay the poll tax, elite, educated converts could move up the ranks of the empire's bureaucracies. Additionally, slaves who converted were more likely to be granted manumission. Unsurprisingly, large numbers of non-Muslims in the new empire converted to Islam in the early Umayyad period.

For pious Muslims who saw Islam as a universal mercy to humankind, the surge in conversions was a testament to the truth of Muhammad's message and a welcome expansion of the Muslim community. For Umayyad officials, however, it was an administrative nightmare that wreaked havoc on tax ledgers: more converts meant less revenue. The heavy reliance on poll taxes proved unsustainable and was eventually adjusted, but in the meantime, Umayyad officials frequently discouraged or refused to recognize conversions. In some cases, provincial governors applied different tax laws to non-Arab converts than they did to Arab Muslims, and many converts saw this as the victory of greed and xenophobia over religious ideals. Arab Muslims stood in a position of immense privilege over other Muslims, and members of the Arab aristocracy often openly disdained the non-Arab newcomers to the faith. The deep societal division helped fuel growing anti-Umayyad sentiment.

Umayyad corruption was soon a byword among the populace, and the assertion of ʿAli's followers that the dynasty was illegitimate from the start began to fall on receptive ears. Because the ca-

liphate was vested with the Prophet's authority, political resistance necessitated a denial of Umayyad claims to the office. Many of the partisans of ʿAli contended that only a member of the Prophet's family – a blood descendent – had the right to lead. ʿAlid loyalism united Arab and non-Arab Muslims, grounding their revolutionary aspirations in religious terms.

Anti-Umayyad sentiment was widespread, but there was little clarity on how a new system should be established. Which member of the Prophet's family had the right to take on the mantle of leadership? Hasan and Husayn, the two sons of ʿAli and Fatima and the Prophet's only two grandsons, had widespread support among the ʿAlid loyalists, but in subsequent generations ʿAlid leaders disagreed sharply as to who was Prophet's rightful current heir. The legitimacy and efficacy of violent rebellion were also a matter of debate. Should a movement coalesce around a rightful leader before initiating change, or should a leader prove himself by initiating an uprising?

Jaʿfar al-Sadiq followed the example of his father and grandfather, embracing a quietest approach and making no claim to the caliphate. These men led no rebellions and refused to give their blessing to cousins and uncles who sought their support in various uprisings. Jaʿfar's grandfather, ʿAli Zayn al-Abidin, had seen the catastrophic results of failed rebellion when his own father, Husayn, was killed in the Karbala massacre in 680. The reluctance of these men to involve themselves in violent revolt, however, does not mean that they ignored the political realities of their day. Jaʿfar's father, Muhammad al-Baqir, was vocal in his criticism of the Umayyads, and when he died, Jaʿfar expanded upon his legacy, helping shape the community of ʿAlid loyalists into something more than a political movement.

Scholarly Controversies of Early Islam

The partisans of ʿAli were not the only group that objected to the Umayyads on religious grounds. And understaning some of these additional movements help provide critical context to the life of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. The Kharijis, for example, were a group that had originally sided with ʿAli in the first civil war and were harsh critics of the Umayyad dynasty. This hardline faction left ʿAli's camp, however, when he agreed to arbitration during the war. They believed that by doing so, he was choosing political expediency over

the caliphal imperative to execute God's will on earth. Ironically, it was ʿAli's conflict with the Kharijis, not his fight with the Umayyads, which ended his life. From the perspective of the Kharijis, claims to the caliphate needed to be based on more than family lineage (Umayyad, ʿAlid, or otherwise). Legitimate caliphs must implement God's rulings without wavering, and failure to do so called into question a leader's standing as a true Muslim. Their rejection of ʿAli, based on his decision to submit to arbitration durin the war, ensured that the Kharijis would remain in tension with the ʿAlid leaders for centuries.

The Khariji movement sparked vigorous and formative debates over the issue of who counted as a Muslim. At the center of this question was the problem of sin: if a Muslim committed a grave sin, was he or she no longer a Muslim? The Kharijis saw themselves as the only true Muslims, counting all others as apostates. Unsurprisingly, this position was rejected as divisive by most Muslims, but the Khariji stance contributed to several trends in the broader Muslim community. These included a growing emphasis on belief (*iman*) as well as attempts to clarify orthodoxy and develop a method for determining what counted as sin. Many believed that the task of judging humanity and determining whether or not an individual was a true Muslim belonged to God, not humanity. Others, however, believed that postponing judgment of fellow Muslims led to a willingness to accept sin (and the status quo of corrupt Umayyad rule).

Another religious debate with political implications focused on the tension between divine omnipotence and human responsibility. This quandary is familiar in all monotheistic traditions: if God is omnipotent and the sole creator of all things, from whence comes evil? By extension, how can humans be held accountable for their evil deeds if all things are determined by God? These abstract questions have sparked debate and division in Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities over the centuries. Emphasizing God's determinism of human affairs makes it difficult to muster a moral critique of a corrupt authority. Thus, it should come as no surprise that one of the most unrelenting critics of the Umayyads in the eighth century, Hasan al-Basri, was also one of the most prominent proponents of human free will.

The blending of politics and religion is not unique to the Islamic tradition, and attempting to separate the two domains is

problematic, especially in pre-modern contexts. As has been the case in many contexts across history, religious debates in Muslim communities were tied to political and social issues. Interestingly, however, widespread disenchantment with Umayyad policies meant that even those who had become resigned to the dynasty's leadership tended to look elsewhere for religious guidance. The assumption that the caliph was authoritative in matters of both politics and religion, as the Prophet had been in Medina, increasingly became a theoretical ideal that was disconnected from the actual Umayyad caliphs themselves. By the early eighth century, a professional class of religious scholars was emerging, increasingly known as the *ʿulama*. These people devoted their lives to studying the Qurʾan, debating the details of religious responsibility, and collecting stories of lives of the Prophet and his companions. Such scholars and teachers frequently garnered large followings and widespread admiration. Their authority was rooted in their knowledge of religion, and thus they were able to exercise influence outside of political power structures. Umayyad authorities employed and appointed some of these men and women (though the women were a small minority and tended to be excluded from certain disciplines and positions), but many openly scorned the dynasty and ridiculed any scholar who consented to be on the government payroll. In practice, a division had developed between political and religious spheres of authority.

The relative intellectual freedom of the *ʿulama* gave rise to contentious debates about the limits of the scholar's ability to determine and interpret religious knowledge. Even what counted as religious knowledge was debated, though it was generally understood to consist of two things: knowledge of the Qurʾan and knowledge of authoritative traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Both of these were considered "received knowledge," since they had been passed down from the generation that had known the Prophet and heard him recite the Qurʾan. The domain of "reasoned knowledge" was subject to greater controversy. This category included all knowledge derived through reason and non-literal interpretation. This included many basic theological assertions, such as the idea that God does not have a physical body. Because the Qurʾan does not state it explicitly, this claim and others like it had to be developed through reason and non-literal interpretations. By the eighth century, many were concerned that scholars, especially

those influenced by philosophy, were taking too many liberties in their interpretations. The legitimacy of all knowledge outside the realm of "received knowledge" was questioned by many, and flatly rejected by some.

In order to avoid anachronistic conceptions of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's ideas, his life must be considered in this intellectual and religious context. This was a dynamic point in history in which core questions of interpretation were still being negotiated within the Islamic tradition. Jaʿfar and his father earned great respect for their knowledge and insight on these matters, and Jaʿfar was careful to avoid being pigeonholed into one side or the other of many divisive debates. As explained more later, when it came to the issues of interpretive freedom or the authority of "reasoned knowledge," Jaʿfar offered alternative ways to approach the issues and constructed positions that defied neat categorization.

Legacy of a Suffering Family

Jaʿfar's family elicited feelings of both admiration and pity in the Muslim community. All of the descendants of the Prophet through his daughter, Fatima, are known as *ahl al-bayt*, or "people of the house." The phrase evokes the intimate connection between the Prophet and his kin. In a famous and widely circulated story, Muhammad told his followers that he is leaving behind two important things for them: the Qurʾan and his *ahl al-bayt.* The parameters of the Prophet's family were contested, and some believed that it included his entire clan or even the whole Quraysh tribe, but few disputed the centrality of his daughter Fatima and her two sons, Hasan and Husayn. This was the core of the *ahl al-bayt*, and this prestigious pedigree underlay the widespread admiration for Jaʿfar and his family.

But the Prophet's family was also renowned for loss and suffering. The massacre at Karbala is the most famous symbol of their affliction, but other incidents involving Fatima and ʿAli also paint the family in a sorrowful light. The Prophet's love for Fatima is recounted in many stories, and she went into deep mourning upon his death. Her grief was compounded when the first caliph Abu Bakr took the surprising step of rejecting her claim to her inheritance. The Qurʾan explicitly states that women have a right to their share of an inheritance, but Abu Bakr argued that the Prophet was a unique case and that no one could inherit from him. Even more

controversially, the caliph claimed that a parcel of land that the Prophet had entrusted to Fatima before his death was now the property of the community [Tabari, IX, 196-197]. This denial of Fatima's property rights and source of income occurred on the heels of what ʿAli's followers believed was a manipulative scheme by Abu Bakr and ʿUmar (the second caliph) to procure the caliphate for themselves. A family rivalry that had been simmering for years had bubbled over.

Fatima was devastated by this turn of events, and many stories from the time testify to her feeling mistreated and betrayed. She died only six months after her father, disillusioned and angry at Abu Bakr, ʿUmar, and the community that turned its back on her. She is said to have requested that ʿAli bury her at night in secret so that her adversaries could not use her funeral as an opportunity to feign reconciliation. ʿAli carried out her request, and the site of Fatima's grave remains unknown, which some see as a testament to the injustice that befell her. For most Shiʿa Muslims, Fatima's inheritance dispute is equated with a broader struggle for justice, a motif which has appeared and reappeared across the centuries in Muslim literature.

The most memorable tragedy to strike the family, however, was the brutal massacre at Karbala of Husayn and his followers half a century after Fatima's death. ʿAli was appointed caliph in 656, but the communal rifts that began after the Prophet's death had become entrenched, and his time as leader of the community was rife with conflict and disputes. After ʿAli's assassination in 661, his eldest son Hasan agreed to a truce with his father's rival, effectively conceding the caliphate to the Umayyads. Hasan's brother Husayn, however, held out hope that leadership could be restored to the Prophet's family. After Hasan passed away, ʿAlid loyalists called on Husayn to lead the community. Along with a network of family members and supporters in Medina, a large contingent of anti-Umayyad residents of Kufa, in southern Iraq, urged Husayn to take the lead. In 680, as Husayn and his followers travelled to unite with supporters in Kufa, Umayyad forces intercepted them on the plains of Karbala. In one of the most infamous stories in Islamic history, the caliph's troops overwhelmed Husayn's party, killing the Prophet's grandson and anyone who came to his aid. The lives of the women, most of the children, and a few sick boys were spared, but all who escaped death were taken captive. Jaʿfar

al-Sadiq heard first-hand accounts of that day, known as "Ashura," from many family members, including his grandfather, ʿAli Zayn al-Abidin, who had been too sick to fight but had watched the tragedy unfold.

As happens so often in history, the brutal suppression of a rebellion inspired further support for it. Even those who were not ʿAlid loyalists saw the violence against Husayn and his family as an affront to the Prophet and a grotesque perversion of caliphal authority. In the decades and centuries that followed, Ashura and the elegies commemorating the tragic day on which Husayn and his companions were killed in Karbala, became a rallying cry against tyranny.

Family Revolutionaries

The early history of Islam, especially the Umayyad period, is littered with accounts of attempted revolutions. These were frequently led by ʿAlid families or were undertaken their name, and nearly all were disastrous failures. When news of the Karbala massacre reached the ʿAlid loyalists in Kufa, they realized they had failed to aid Husayn in his hour of need. Thousands of mourners gathered to express their deep remorse for not having come to his aid and their determination to seek vengeance against the Umayyad state. Some of these mourners made secret pledges to one another, forming an underground society dedicated to making amends for their failure to protect Husayn. The group was militant in its approach, but deeply religious in its assessment of the moral injustices inflicted upon the *ahl al-bayt.* These were the "Penitents" (*Tawwabun*), and the most prominent of their leaders, Sulayman ibn Surad, had long been a supporter of the ʿAlids. Sulayman had been critical of Hasan's willingness to concede his rights to the Umayyads, and after the latter's death, he urged Husayn to take on the mantle of leadership and encouraged him to come to Kufa. Understandably, Sulayman was devastated by Husayn's death at Karbala and felt he had played a role in the tragedy that occurred. For three years, the Penitents plotted their rebellion in the name of the martyred Husayn. A speech attributed to one of the group's prominent members, ʿUbayd Allah al-Murri, provides a glimpse of the moment that he summoned people to the cause:

> Have you not seen and have you not heard what evil was done to the son of your Prophet's daughter? Did you not

> regard how the people violated his sanctity, considered as weakness his solitariness, splattered him with blood, and pulled him down to the ground? In it they did not respect their Lord or al-Ḥusayn's kinship with the Prophet. They made him a target for arrows and left him a slaughter for hyenas. Blessed are the eyes of him who has seen the like of him, and blessed is al-Ḥusayn the son of ʿAlī. What a man was he they betrayed! He was true and patient, trustworthy, helpful and resolute; he was the son of the first of the Muslims in Islam and the son of the daughter of the Messenger of the Lord of the Worlds. His defenders were few while his foes flocked around him, and his enemy killed him while his friend betrayed him. Woe to the killer and shame on the traitor! God will accept no plea from his killer and no excuse from his betrayer unless he sincerely turns to God in repentance, struggles against the murderers, and opposes the unrighteous. Perhaps on those conditions God will accept the repentance and disregard the offense. We call you to the Book of God, the Sunnah of His Prophet, the seeking of vengeance for the blood of his family, and the struggle against the violators of God's law and renegades. If we are killed, that which God has prepared for us with Him is better for the godfearing; if we are victorious, then we will restore this authority to the family of the Prophet! [Tabari, XX: 91-92]

The Penitents put their plans into motion in 684, shortly after the death of the caliph Yazid and just as a new administration took shape within the Umayyad palace. The group chose to organize itself at Karbala, where members commemorated the death of Husayn and his followers. This may have been the first organized gathering of mourners in Karbala, a ritual that later Shiʿa as well as broader communities of *shiʿa*-friendly Muslims have now observed for centuries. Today, Karbala receives more pilgrims each year than nearly any other place on earth, including Mecca. On that first gathering in 684, however, the Penitents were not merely mourning: they were gearing up for an uprising. And despite a lower-than-expected turnout, several thousand people committed their lives to seeking justice for the *ahl al-bayt.* In January of 685 the chance arose to prove their loyalty to Husayn, and they

met the Umayyad army in battle. Overwhelmed and outnumbered, the Penitents were decimated. Despite defeat on the battlefield, the Penitents were still able to influence popular opinion and religious sentiments. Many members of society were sympathetic to and inspired by the group's devotion to Husayn, and the mantra of justice for the *ahl al-bayt* endured as a means of garnering support for anti-Umayyad uprisings.

Born just a decade or two after the Penitents' defeat, Jaʿfar grew up in Medina surrounded by stories like these. Meanwhile, disagreements had surfaced among the ʿAlids over which member of the family was the rightful leader. Husayn's sole surviving son, ʿAli Zayn al-Abidin, chose to remove himself from all political engagements, but quietly groomed his sons for leadership through piety and learning. The children and grandchildren of Hasan, however, had their own aspirations for carrying on the family's legacy. These two main branches of the family, known as the Hasanids and Husaynids, jostled for prominence even as they supported one another in common causes. At times, the rivalry between these two lines devolved into petty disputes over land and assets, which detracted from the family's loftier claims.

For many, ʿAli Zayn al-Abidin would eventually be seen as the clear successor of the Husaynid line. Two of his sons, Zayd and Muhammad al-Baqir (Jaʿfar's father), were particularly celebrated by the community. Both were devoted scholars and pious believers who garnered the attention and respect of those whose hope lay in the ʿAlids. Muhammad al-Baqir was the oldest son, and Zayd assisted him for many years as they worked for Husaynid interests. Over time, however, Zayd grew impatient with the quietist approach of his brother. Zayd preferred a more aggressive course of action, arguing that the family should prove its legitimacy by taking up the sword against the Umayyads. Muhammad disagreed, holding fast to their father's position of avoiding political rebellions and apparently rejecting anyone's claim that he was the true caliph. When Muhammad al-Baqir died, Zayd prepared himself to take on leadership, calling his family to his aid. Many among the ʿAlids and beyond followed him. But Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, himself a revered leader by that time, refused to join his uncle.

The failure to garner Jaʿfar's support was a blow to Zayd's movement, and the latter's followers lambasted the Jaʿfaris, calling them the "rejectors" (*rawafid*). The pejorative stuck with Jaʿfar's

lineage and his followers for centuries, though the term was later rebranded by Jaʿfaris, claiming it referred to their rejection of evil rather than a rejection of Zayd. As for Zayd himself, he was killed by an arrow to the skull during a battle in March of 740 after he was abandoned by a portion of his army. His followers attempted to hide his corpse, but Umayyad officials found and exhumed it. After severing the head and sending it to Damascus, they crucified his body and left it hanging in Kufa for several years as a warning to other conspirators. Zayd had been widely respected despite his rivalry with Jaʿfar, and his death further undermined the legitimacy of the Umayyads. Followers of Zayd's teachings, though not organized at the time of his death, would later constitute an enduring religious perspective. Zaydi Shiʿism survives in the present day as a distinct tradition of Islamic thought.

Meanwhile, on the Hasanid side of the family, Hasan's grandson ʿAbdullah was positioning his own sons to lead the ʿAlid family and restore justice to Islamic polity. He declared that his eldest son, Muhammad, would be the one who would restore justice to the Muslim community and return the Prophet's family to its ordained role. This son was widely revered and became known by his honorific, al-Nafs al-Zakiyya ("The Pure Soul"). Various instigators latched themselves onto him, and for a time he was a contender for the caliphate. In 744, as the Umayyad dynasty was teetering on the edge of collapse, ʿAbdullah called together leaders of the *ahl al-bayt* and had them pledge their loyalty to al-Nafs al-Zakiyya. Similar to other occasions, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq held out his support and was unreceptive to this vision for regaining power, perhaps uncomfortable with conceding leadership to the Hasanid branch of the family.

A few years later, as the revolution led by Abu Muslim in the Persian east came sweeping through the empire with a promise to put someone from the *ahl al-bayt* at the helm, Umayyad power was finally depleted. Too much ill will toward the dynasty had accumulated. Too many non-Arab converts were convinced they were being cheated; and hope for a fresh start with the Prophet's family in leadership had become mainstream. Most people assumed the new caliph would be a descendant of ʿAli and Fatima, but with Jaʿfar distancing himself from the uprising, ʿAbdullah and his sons, al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and Ibrahim, hoped to seize the day. The winds shifted, however, and political alliances coalesced in favor of the descen-

dants of the Prophet's uncle, ʿAbbas. To the surprise of many, the ʿAbbasid line gained the upper hand and claimed its standing as part of the *ahl al-bayt,* even though it was not part of the direct line of the Prophet. Once again, the ʿAlids felt betrayed, and before long their loyalists were at odds with the new dynasty. In the coming years al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and Ibrahim led uprisings against the ʿAbassids, who, like the Umayyads before them, brutally suppressed the ʿAlid contenders.

Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's quietism allowed him to outlive all of these revolutionaries, but his stance should not be construed as apathetic. Some ʿAlids pledged their loyalty to the Umayyads and early ʿAbbasids, receiving revenue or government positions in exchange; Jaʿfar did not. Hey may have rejected calls to arms by members of his family, but he was equally resolute in his refusal to accept Umayyad claims to legitimate authority. As we will see, Jaʿfar was convinced that God would eventually bring about justice in the world and so Jaʿfar focused on his commitment to education and spiritual guidance. These were investments in the Prophet's family that established a more enduring legacy and lasting impact than the revolutionary causes of his siblings and cousins.

Messianic Hopes

The revolutionary movements throughout Jaʿfar's lifetime often reflected the emergence of a messianic hope. As anger grew over perceived injustices under the Umayyad rule, some yearned for a complete overturning of the system, an apocalyptic end to injustice and return to the moral purity envisioned by the Qurʾan. Various ideas of a messianic deliverer who could carry out this dramatic socio-religious agenda appealed to a variety of groups. In the eyes of many, only a divinely ordained man – referred to as the *mahdi* ("guided one") – could possibly be successful. And so the task for some became recognizing this person and supporting his struggle when he emerged. Deliverance through a divinely appointed man is a theme that runs throughout Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, surfacing with more or less urgency at various points in history. As the end of the first Islamic century neared, messianic expectation was percolating. Some Umayyad caliphs of the time adopted the title of the *Mahdi* for themselves, and at least a few intellectuals believed that the Islamic year 100 (718 in the Gregorian calendar) would be the end of the old world order. The

second century of Islam dawned with little change, but the messianic mood remained, sparking hope in anti-Umayyad, and later in anti-ʿAbbasid, circles. The desire for the appearance of a *mahdi* dovetailed easily with the hope that the family of the Prophet would be restored to its rightful role of leadership, and thus messianism was woven into the fabric of ʿAlid loyalism.

Perhaps the most important example of messianic ʿAlid rebellion is the uprising led by al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, a Kufan agitator for the ʿAlid cause. After the failure of the Penitents to avenge the death of Husayn, Mukhtar looked for ways to reignite the rebellion. He claimed that the identity of the *mahdi* had been revealed to him and that he had been appointed as the *mahdi*'s personal assistant. The *mahdi*, he claimed, was Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya, the third son of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib. Ibn Hanafiyya was one of the senior leaders among the descendants of ʿAli, though notably not through the lineage of Fatima. Whether Mukhtar gained Ibn Hanafiyya's approval, or even informed the latter of his plans, is not clear. Ibn Hanafiyya lived quietly in Medina, and most indications suggest that he did not support Mukhtar's claims. Nonetheless, the hope for an ʿAlid avenger resonated with many Kufans, and thus the claim had power. Promises of a more just and egalitarian society were particularly appealing to non-Arab Muslims, many of whom joined the ranks of al-Mukhtar's campaign. Kufa was soon in Mukhtar's control, though some in the Arab aristocracy resented their loss of certain privileges, and a few groups had to be forcefully put down. To help motivate and inspire his followers, Mukhtar drew upon a wide array of images and symbols from various Near Eastern religious influences, especially Jewish and Christian apocalyptic and eschatological traditions.

Within three years, however, al-Mukhtar's forces were besieged and destroyed by the Umayyads. Mukhtar was killed in 687, and many of the non-Arab Muslims who had followed him found themselves in worse conditions than ever before. Remnants of the movement survived in other regions, particularly near Mecca and Medina, and numerous offshoot groups held out hope in Ibn Hanafiyya as the *mahdi*. When Ibn Hanafiyya died in the year 700, claims began to circulate that he was not dead but in hiding, or that he would soon rise from the dead to bring justice to the world. In addition, some looked to Ibn Hanafiyya's sons for leadership. One of the most consequential outcomes of the al-Mukhtar/

Ibn Hanafiyya phenomenon was how it entwined ʿAlid loyalism, hopes for a *mahdi*, and apocalyptic revolution in popular imagination. The connections between these things shaped many discussions in Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's day. They also contributed to the success of the ʿAbbasid revolution, and they have had long-lasting effects on Shiʿa and Sunni thought.

Establishing Stability through *Walaya* and *Nass*

Jaʿfar al-Sadiq sometimes quoted a piece of sober advice he and his brothers had received from their father: "Sons, stay out of people's affairs and be patient in the hard times. If your people ask you to join a cause that will bring more harm than good, do not respond." [*Amali,* 185]. Jaʿfar lived by this counsel throughout the trials and uncertainties of his lifetime. This was not merely a matter of self-preservation, but the preservation of his family's legacy and teachings. Jaʿfar bluntly denied any claim that he was the *mahdi* or that he should be the caliph. The revolutionary-minded members of his family resented his cautious approach, dismissing him as a "bookworm" [Crow, 61], in a jab at his preoccupation with learning and education.

The leaders of the *ahl al-bayt* largely agreed that the Umayyad caliphate was illegitimate, but they did not see eye to eye on a course of action. Jaʿfar was convinced that his family held a treasure of knowledge and insight that needed to be protected and disseminated. In his view, legitimate authority was being usurped not only by the Umayyads, but also by scholars whose teachings Jaʿfar felt were out of step with the Prophet's true vision. By prioritizing the struggle against the latter, Jaʿfar was not conceding his political rights, but rather focusing on his family's most important asset: religious knowledge (*ʿilm*). At times, Jaʿfar was exasperated by those who ignored the religious guidance his family offered the community. He believed his family provided an intimate understanding of the Prophet's life and the Qurʾan that was beyond the grasp of other teachers. In an increasingly competitive market of religious scholars and ideas, Jaʿfar was determined to prove that his family had something special to offer.

In order to provide clarity about religious authority, Jaʿfar elaborated on his father's teachings regarding two key concepts: *walaya* and *nass.* Both concepts helped establish a clear system of religious authority that could provide the stability necessary for Islamic thought to flourish. As in many cases related to Jaʿfar's

teachings, it is difficult to discern whether he or his father first articulated the doctrinal formulation of these two concepts. But credit goes to Jaʿfar for presenting the two ideas in the most impactful way, and his followers continued to build upon his work after his death [Dakake, 117-118].

The Arabic word *walaya* is related to the concept of loyalty, and it is sometimes translated as "spiritual allegiance." Historically it has referred to a social bond, a reciprocal relationship of support between two parties that sometimes involves contractual obligations. The term was commonly used in religious contexts in early Islamic history, but Jaʿfar and his father developed the idea as a foundational doctrine that helped frame their teachings. For the supporters of ʿAli, *walaya* was a reference both to ʿAli's close connection to the Prophet and ʿAli's connection to his supporters. The *ahl al-bayt* had a special connection to ʿAli and to the Prophet, and Jaʿfar believed that ordinary Muslims could – and should – include themselves in that connection through *walaya.* Among other things, the concept served as a way of formalizing one's allegiance to the Prophet's progeny. *Walaya* was, therefore, an essential and explicit commitment to the leaders of the *ahl al-bayt* that formed a practical basis for their religious authority.

In practice, *walaya* served as a way to distinguish the followers of the *ahl al-bayt* from the uncommitted. In a context where political agitators often feigned a connection to *ahl al-bayt* to garner public support, Jaʿfar felt it necessary to bring clarity to the loyalties of the various factions emerging. *Walaya* became the foundation of a centralized structure of religious authority, and the practice of pledging loyalty was placed on par with pillars of Islam like fasting and prayer. Although the concept had clear political implications, it was largely considered a theological issue within the purview of the *ʿulama* (religious scholars) and their religious debates. Even as Jaʿfar avoided militant uprisings that were largely doomed to failure, he constructed the framework of a new institutionalized authority: the imamate. Prior to this time, the caliphate had been the only theoretical locus for temporal and religious authority. The caliph functioned as both military commander and the leader (*imam*) of prayers, and the terms "caliph" and "imam" were used interchangeably. With the notion of *walaya,* Jaʿfar created space for a religious community that did not acknowledge the caliph's authority and instead followed the *ahl al-bayt.*

Acknowledging the religious authority of the *ahl al-bayt* was a relatively simple matter in the abstract, but it was complicated in reality by perennial questions of succession and differences of opinion over how a leader should be chosen. *Walaya* to the *ahl al-bayt* in general had broad appeal among Muslims, but Jaʿfar emphasized the importance of pledging *walaya* to a particular person: the patriarch/imam of the *ahl al-bayt*. But who was the rightful imam? Rival claims by the Hasanid and Husaynid lines were merely the tip of the iceberg of controversy, and never-ending disagreement threatened to discredit the entire framework. Zayd, Jaʿfar's uncle, famously argued that anyone could be the imam as long as that person claimed the role and earned it by setting right society's problems. Jaʿfar's position as the eldest son of an eldest son strengthened his claim to be the leader of the Husaynid branch of the family, but he recognized the need for greater clarity about succession, especially since the Husaynid line could not rest its claim on the rights of the oldest child, because Hasan was Husayn's older brother. Against this backdrop, Jaʿfar championed the idea of *nass*, the explicit designation of a successor.

The concept of *nass* offered a way out of endless controversies over leadership. It meant that the existing imam explicitly named his own successor, forestalling potential conflict over succession after his death. As the head of the *ahl al-bayt*, the imam was presumed to be the best, the most knowledgeable, and the most pious member of the family. Who better to designate the next imam? *Nass* promised clarity for religious leadership going forward. Presented as something deeply sacred, it sealed a person's status as imam even if that person was not recognized as the caliph by the larger community. The elaboration of *walaya* and *nass* made it possible for an imam to claim ultimate religious authority apart from the caliphate. Jaʿfar felt that he had been chosen by his father to lead the community, and he was determined to carry out his responsibilities. After seeing the *ahl al-bayt* splintered by rivalries over succession, he was careful to designate his own heir before his death. Nonetheless, complications arose in his final years of life.

An Unforeseen Crisis

When Jaʿfar married his first wife, Fatima, he must have hoped that a successor would be born from this union. Fatima was a distant cousin and a descendant of the Hasanids, and a son had the po-

tential to bring reconciliation and cooperation between the two families. And indeed, the couple had two sons, Ismaʿil and Abdullah. Jaʿfar groomed both for possible leadership, teaching them the spiritual disciplines and traditions of their family. Unlike many of his fellow patriarchs in the *ahl al-bayt*, Jaʿfar had survived both the downfall of the Umayyads and the rise of the ʿAbbasids, who were increasingly antagonistic toward the ʿAlids. Jaʿfar had built upon his father's legacy, garnering respect and praise. A smooth transition from Jaʿfar to his son was critical for the continuance of a line of imams tasked with providing religious guidance for the community.

In conformity with his carefully-reasoned doctrine of *nass,* Jaʿfar designated his oldest son, Ismaʿil, as the next imam to whom the community should pledge its loyalty. Jaʿfar appears to have spent years passing knowledge on to his son and initiating him in the innermost secrets of the esoteric and mystical meanings of the Qurʾan and the teachings of Islam. Late in Jaʿfar's life, however, tragedy struck. Sometime around the year 763, Ismaʿil suffered an untimely death and was laid to rest before his father. It was a shocking turn of events. Jaʿfar's followers were moved by his grief, but the event also sparked doubts in his leadership. Jaʿfar's disciples had faith in his judgment, and many had believed he was protected by God from making any mistakes. This being the case, how were they to understand the death his designated successor? Many different possibilities were suggested and debated, and history has obscured events on the ground. Many conflicting accounts of this period exist, each with its own reasons and logic.

Ironically, despite his efforts to clarify the process of succession, more splits and divisions followed Jaʿfar's death than that of any other imam. Some of the ensuing conflict, however, can be attributed to the size of the following he had attracted. Many Muslims were invested in the question of his succession, and any decision about an heir after the death of Ismaʿil would have been difficult to make and even more difficult to communicate to all of his followers, many of whom lived in distant lands. Most of Jaʿfar's followers seemed to have switched their allegiance immediately to ʿAbdullah, the other son of Fatima and Jaʿfar, but ʿAbdullah died only a few short months after his brother. It was a disorienting year for the community. Some of Jaʿfar's disciples were unable to concede the possibility that he had made a mistake, and rumors

spread to the effect that Ismaʿil's death was a falsehood designed to protect him and keep him hidden from the ʿAbbasids. Ismaʿil had already established a loyal following for himself and was likely considered an imam by his students. Perhaps before his death he had designated his own oldest son, Muhammad, as his successor. Or perhaps the imamate had passed directly from Jaʿfar to Ismaʿil's son. Had God changed his mind about Ismaʿil or ʿAbdullah? Might that be the reason they died before their father? Perhaps one of Jaʿfar's other sons was the true heir to the imamate. All of these questions swirled in the air at the end of Jaʿfar's life, and he was unable to settle the issues before he died just a few years after his two oldest sons. It was left to his followers to make sense of events and chart a path forward, as I discuss further in chapter four.

Conclusion

When Jaʿfar died in 765, the categories of Sunni and Shiʿa as we know them today did not yet exist. Rather, the partisans, or *shiʿa,* of ʿAli were an amorphous group comprised of people who believed that ʿAli had been Muhammad's rightful successor and that the office of caliph should be filled by an ʿAlid leader. The "Shiʿism" of subsequent centuries had its roots in this movement, but the two are not identical, and characterizing ʿAlid supporters of this period as "Shiʿa" is not a faithful representation of the historical situation. Characterizing other Muslims of Jaʿfar's day as Sunni would be even more anachronistic. Many of the religious and intellectual contributions of Jaʿfar's contemporaries had a decisive impact on Sunni Muslim thought as it developed in subsequent centuries, but Sunni Islam as we understand it today was not a category in the eighth century, and wouldn't be for several hundred years. In fact, many of the scholars of Jaʿfar's era who have since been considered harbingers of Sunni thought were staunch supporters of the *ahl al-bayt,* and some were even ʿAlid activists.

Looking back from our vantage point today, Jaʿfar's impact wasn't confined to the sectarian identities of subsequent generations. His teachings contributed to a wide spectrum of Islamic thought. The breadth of his influence is due in part to the diversity of his students: many of the leading scholars of his day studied under him for at least a short period of time. Others who did not study under him were still inspired by his way of life, his ascetic self-sacrificing piety. His closest followers, however, were

those who had pledged their *walaya* to Jaʿfar as an imam, and these disciples also came to be known as "Imamis." The teachings of Jaʿfar and his father were directly responsible for establishing this notion of the imamate as the source of religious authority, which was a significant contributing factor in the later development of Shiʿa Islam. The challenge of sorting out succession after Jaʿfar's death was left to these Imamis, and the two major existing branches of Shiʿism, Twelver Shiʿism and Ismaʿili Shiʿism, emerged from this time period. These two schools developed in different directions, but adherents to both regard Jaʿfar as one of the most reliable and important guides to the true meaning of Islam.

Selected Quotes Attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq

Throughout many of the sayings attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, there is an air of pessimism and discomfort with the state of societal affairs around him. While in retrospect, we can see the formative nature of the times in which he lived, Jaʿfar himself seemed deeply troubled by the corruption of political and religious leaders around him and the trials suffered by many of the pious. Commenting on the state of world around him, Jaʿfar bleakly but colorfully commented:

> This world is like a body whose head is pride, whose eyes are avarice, whose ears are greed, whose tongue is dissimulation, whose hand is desire, whose legs are vanity, whose heart is heedlessness, whose being is annihilation, and whose product is extinction. It brings pride to whoever loves it, avarice to whoever prefers it, greed to whoever seeks it, and cloaks with hypocrisy whoever praises it. It gives vanity power over whoever desires it; it leads to heedlessness in the person who relies on it. It seduces whoever admires its goods, but those goods do not last for him. [*Lantern*, 77-78]

But Jaʿfar did not give into despair, but attempted to model a different approach to the world. When reflecting on a Qur'anic passage (21:83) referencing adversity faced by the Prophet Job, Jaʿfar had this to say:

> When Job had attained a high degree in the trial and found it sweet, the trial became [as it were] a home for him. Then

> when his soul was at ease in (the trial) and he dwelt calmly with it, people extolled him for his patience and praised him. But he said: adversity has befallen me, for the loss of patience. [*Gems*, 91]

It was this patience amidst adversity that Jaʿfar likely sought to embody. In a commentary on another Qur'anic passage (7:196), he said, "Governance has two aspects. [There is] the governance to do with establishing and origination, and there is the governance to do with care and protection for the establishment of the Truth" [*Gems*, 42]. This distinction of types of governance seems to be a clue to how Jaʿfar may have conceptualized his own role, as one attempting to care for and protect the established truths around him rather than trying to create new establishments. In that sense, Jaʿfar was quite conservative and laid blame on leaders after the Prophet Muhammad who had followed their own inclinations and brought forth divisions and disagreements.

In al-Qadi al-Nuʿman's account, Jaʿfar tried to make it clear that the problems in their society stemmed from a departing from the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. In dialogue with a student, Jaʿfar said,

> If the one who assumed authority after the Messenger had been appraised of the matters regarding which he was consulted, he would have answered them whenever they posed questions regarding their disagreement. However, the one who assumed authority did not know the answers to all the questions that were referred to him, so he asked the people about many things that he did not know, and they gave him conflicting answers on those topics. Disagreements occurred as a consequence. If they had submitted to the true authority and accepted his word, then no two of them would have disagreed over the religion of God, just as they did not disagree during the life of the Messenger of God. [*Disagreements*, 8-9]

This quote, to the extent that it may have any authenticity, likely hints at a critique of the Umayyads and the disagreements that emerged between ʿAli and Muʿawiyah. Although Jaʿfar avoided political affairs, his discourses on knowledge functioned as subtle critiques of those in power. Basing his own teaching on the traditions

of the Prophet Muhammad, Jaʿfar is said to have explained:

> The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) said, "Do not sit with every presumptuous caller who summons you from certainty to doubt, from sincerity to showing off, from humility to pride, form good counsel to enmity, and from abstinence to desire. Draw near to the person with knowledge, who summons you from pride to humility, from showing off to sincerity, from doubt to certainty, from desire to abstinence, from enmity to good counsel." None are fit to preach to creation except that person who has gone beyond these evils by his truthfulness. He sees the faults of speech and knows what is sound from what is unsound, the defectiveness of thoughts, and the temptations of the self and his fancies. [*Lantern*, 11]

The commentary which Jaʿfar provided on this quote of the Prophet points to another common theme in the teachings of Jaʿfar, that of truthfulness. In the same work, *Lantern of the Path*, he writes,

> Truthfulness is a light which radiates its reality in its own world: it is like the sun, from whose reality everything seeks light without any decrease occurring in this reality. A truthful person, in fact, is a man who believes every liar, due to the reality of his own truthfulness. [*Lantern*, 19]

Ethical integrity and humble submission to God was Jaʿfar's vision for success in the turbulent and contentious times in which he lived. Commenting on Sura 9:25 of the Qur'an, Jaʿfar explains,

> The procurement of victory lies in one thing: submissiveness and neediness (to God) and [recognition of our] helplessness (before God), according to His words, God has granted you victory in many fields. You did not base yourselves, in them (i.e., in those fields), on yourselves, you did not witness your own strength nor your plentiful numbers, and you knew that victory is not found in strength but that God, He is the Bestower of victory and the Helper. When the slave acknowledges the reality of his weakness, God helps him; whereas abandonment by God comes about through one thing: self-conceit .... When they regarded their strength as a proceeding

from themselves rather than from God, He cast defeat upon them and the earth was straitened for them. God says: then you turned away and fled, [when] left to your (own) might and your strength and your (own) plentiful numbers. [*Gems*, 46]

Chapter II: A Teacher of Teachers

> [Jaʿfar al-Sadiq] was the most renowned man of the highest rank revered more than any other within the larger community as well as among the elite. People passed on knowledge from him wherever they traveled until he was known throughout the lands. And religious scholars have cited his authority on matters more than anyone else from among the *ahl al-bayt.*
>
> Al-Shaykh al-Mufid, *Irshad*, II: 179

There were no school buildings in eighth century Medina. Nonetheless, in Jaʿfar's youth the city was a hub of intellectual activity, and its scholars had a formative impact on academic debates that unfolded across the Muslim world in subsequent centuries. Educational pursuits in this era typically occurred in two places: the mosque and the home. Public lectures and debates took place at the mosque, which was also a place teachers would meet with a group of students. These study circles were the most common format for the transmission of knowledge, and they featured respected scholars sitting against a pillar of the mosque with their students arranged in semi-circles around them. These lessons were governed by extensive rules of etiquette that covered issues ranging from how to sit to the proper manner of dress. Formalities aside, the mosque was an open space for education, and lessons were generally free for anyone who desired to attend.

Teaching in the home offered different advantages. Well-established scholars were sought after, and the private space of the home allowed greater control over the selection of students. The amenities of the home often provided a more comfortable and hospitable setting, and one more conducive to discussing controversial or politically charged topics. Learning sessions in a famous scholar's home were often reserved for advanced students or committed disciples.

Jaʿfar's father excelled as a scholar and teacher, and Jaʿfar was his favorite student and the one to whom he entrusted his legacy.

Jaʿfar also studied under both of his grandfathers and sat in on lessons given by many other scholars in the mosque. The Prophet's mosque in Medina was rebuilt toward the end of Jaʿfar's childhood by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, and the new structure was much larger and better suited to educational activities than the previous mosque. Although Medina had a relatively small population of permanent residents compared to other Umayyad cities, it remained the empire's most important intellectual center, rivaled only by Kufa and Basra in Iraq. The families of Medina, not just the *ahl al-bayt*, were major players in shaping the memory and legacy of the Prophet. Thousands of pilgrims and merchants from across the empire traveled to Mecca and Medina for the annual Hajj pilgrimage, and the cities were frequented by travelers throughout the rest of the year as well. Nearly every Muslim scholar of any repute spent time studying under the masters in Medina.

Scholarship was Jaʿfar's passion, and he devoted his life to it. His reputation was established in the educational circles of Medina, where he gave lessons on the Prophet's teachings, provided commentary on Qurʾanic passages, offered guidance on contemporary debates, and advised people on their physical and spiritual health. As one of the most prominent leaders of the *ahl al-bayt,* he was visited by all types of people. Thousands are said to have spent time learning from him in the mosque, if only for a short time while visiting the city. His disciples pursued more advanced studies in the privacy of Jaʿfar's home, where they were invited to plumb the depths of his teachings. Some of those disciples were then sent to other cities, especially Kufa, to teach on his authority. The next two chapters survey the impact of Jaʿfar's public and private lessons, which helped lay the foundation for an enduring intellectual tradition.

Teaching as Political Resistance

The rise of a class of religious scholars in the early eighth century helped delegitimize Umayyad authority. By operating outside the framework of the state and by taking on debates about proper conduct and morality, these scholars helped establish a framework for critiquing the abuse of power. Repressing the scholarly class posed a significant challenge for Umayyad leaders. Militant rebels could be met on the battlefield and destroyed in the name of

maintaining order, but the power of the religious scholars was difficult for Umayyad leaders to counteract. Attacking scholars only served to prove that accusations of Umayyad tyranny were warranted. A popular saying at the time was, "the ink of a scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr." Another is even sharper in its point: "the best form of *jihad* is speaking out in the presence of an unjust ruler" [Abu Dawud, 809-810]. Mosques around the empire were emerging as powerful loci of public education, and Umayyad authorities had little control over the phenomenon.

Not all scholars were opposed to Umayyad rule; many stayed out of politics entirely. Still others worked for the Umayyad state, with top religious scholars serving as judges in major cities throughout the empire. Scholars who worked for the Umayyads, however, had to contend with the popular suspicion that their ethics were compromised. Government positions were clearly understood to restrict freedom of conscience. Jaʿfar once emphasized a teaching of the Prophet he had received in which the Prophet claimed, "The legal scholars are representatives of the prophets as long as they don't enter the world." When asked what he meant by entering the world, Jaʿfar said, the Prophet clarified that he was referring to those working for the central government. "When they do that," the Prophet added, "protect your religion from them." [Kulayni, I: 46]

Some Umayyad caliphs explicitly claimed religious authority by appending God's name to their title. This claim to be the *Khalifat Allah* ("Deputy of God") prompted debate over the original meaning of the word *khalifa.* The term caliph is the anglicized form of the word and its literal meaning is similar to terms like deputy or successor. But was the caliph the deputy/successor of God or of the Prophet? Many scholars were concerned by this Umayyad assertion, insisting that the role of caliph was properly understood as the role of *khalifat al-rusul,* or successor to the Prophet, and that the Prophet's life was the precedent for how caliphs should rule. This debate about the true meaning of the term *khalifa* reveals much about the antagonism between the scholarly class and the ruling elite in Jaʿfar's time. This was a profound rupture, and the full ramifications of the division would become apparent in the ʿAbbasid period.

In many ways, Medina was a thorn in the side of the Umayyads. Like Mecca, it had been designated by the Prophet to be a sanctuary (*haram*), and no killing, political or otherwise, was per-

mitted within its confines. This designation provided its residents and visitors greater freedom to speak and teach ideas that were against the interests of the state. Such freedom was not absolute, however. At times, Umayyad secret informants were sent to listen in on religious lessons to identify potential rebellions before they began. Navigating the challenges of this politically charged setting was difficult for scholars.

The city of Medina was also undergoing tremendous changes. The new stone pillars that replaced the wooden construction of the original mosque are just one example of how increased revenue and investment were reshaping the urban landscape. Men returned from fighting on the frontiers bearing the spoils of war, which, along with the revenues from their new landholdings, kept the economy going strong. Pilgrims from as far away as Spain and China came to the city, praying in the mosque and taking the religious knowledge they acquired there back to their home communities. Medina functioned not only as a place that spread knowledge of Islam, but also as a place that had tremendous impact on how Islam was practiced and would come to be known. Jaʿfar was a part of that vibrant and formative context as he gave lessons and represented the *ahl al-bayt*.

To an Islamic community whose horizons were rapidly expanding, Medina offered unique proximity and insight into the teachings and life of the Prophet. As time passed, the details of Muhammad's life receded into history, and the circumstances in which he lived bore little resemblance to those of the Arabs who ruled the empire. The Umayyad caliphs did much to shape the course of Islamic history, but many believed that they had abandoned the example of the Prophet. The Qurʾan had been reliably preserved, but uncertainty remained about the person to whom it had been revealed. In the political scramble to manage a vast new realm, much had been forgotten about the Prophet's way of life. Many stories about him were in circulation, but it was hard to separate trustworthy accounts from lies and forgeries. In many people's minds, Medina was a place where the most authentic accounts of the Prophet's life and teachings could be found, preserved by the descendants of his friends and family. These accounts, above all other forms of religious knowledge, were worth devoting one's life to receive. This was a treasure that Jaʿfar believed his family had in abundance, an inheritance that surpassed all others.

Establishing Grounds for Authority: Piety (*taqwa*)

Umayyad claims of religious authority were widely distrusted, and many community leaders and "piety-minded" believers (to use Marshall Hodgson's term) looked elsewhere for religious guidance. The first few caliphs after Muhammad's death had sufficient credibility to make authoritative decisions on religious questions, but the Umayyads had lost the public's confidence. Moreover, by the eighth century, it was clear that the Qurʾan could not meet the demand for practical religious guidance on its own. Too many questions and issues had arisen that it did not explicitly address. In theory, it remained relevant and authoritative in all matters, but the breadth of interpretations available made questions of methodology too consequential to ignore. Interlocking debates about the meaning of the Qurʾan, appropriate methods of interpretation, and religious authority were rife in religious circles.

Location had a significant impact on how different Muslim communities negotiated questions of interpretation. Cities like Kufa, Basra, Damascus, and Medina were each home to unique traditions and approaches to the Qurʾan and issues of interpretation. This is not to say that the scholarly landscape of any given city was homogenous. Diversity existed in each context, and the movement of scholars between regions helped ensure the transmission and cross-pollination of ideas. Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's following had its roots in the scholarly circles that had coalesced around his father in Medina, but he had a large number of devotees in Kufa and throughout Khorasan, the Persianate cultural realm of the Iranian highlands and central Asia. Jaʿfar embraced his inherited role and sought to assure his followers that they were receiving the most reliable guidance. He worked steadily to establish his authority and defend the authority of his family's traditions in the face of competing claims by rival leaders in the *ahl al-bayt* and by those who opposed the *ahl al-bayt* altogether.

In the dynamic intellectual space of Medina, claims to religious authority were not accepted at face value, and Jaʿfar had to prove that his guidance was reliable and authentic. Toward that end, he appears to have staked his reputation on two key features: his virtuous lifestyle and superior knowledge. These were of course supported by the notion that a family line going back to the Prophet predisposed one to excel in these two areas. But it is nonetheless

telling that he rooted his authority in these traits rather than, for example, political prominence or success on the battlefield. From Jaʿfar's perspective, personal piety and devotion to knowledge were proof that he had been chosen to carry on the Prophet's legacy and that he was a reliable guide for the community.

In many ways, debates over religious authority were debates about the nature of Islam and what it meant to be a follower of Muhammad. Jaʿfar consistently urged his students to ground their lives in piety before entering philosophical debates or engaging in political rivalries. One of Jaʿfar's students recorded his teacher as saying, "Do not let people put you in a dangerous position. Whatever is destined will happen regardless of them. Don't waste your days with petty things, for the One who keeps track of everything is with you. Always do good deeds. For I don't know of a more important call that can be achieved so quickly as doing more good deeds" [*Amali,* 50]. Jaʿfar was concerned that political grievances, even when justified, were distracting people from the fundamental concern of living a righteous life.

For Jaʿfar, the virtuous life was one lived in a humble manner, prioritizing concern for others over self-interest. When asked what constitutes virtue, Jaʿfar listed these ten traits, urging his students to pursue them: "Be truthful in speech, sincere in intimacy, keeping faith till the end, communicating with family, showing hospitality to the weak, feeding the wayfarer, being fair in trade, protecting neighbors and friends, and, above all, being modest" [*Amali,*141]. Lists like this can be found throughout the Jaʿfar's teachings, and the traits they enumerated were the foundation of all his intellectual pursuits. His ethical vision was one in which worship of God was grounded in service to humanity. Working toward a just and mutually supportive society was as necessary as performing acts of personal piety. "Make sure to pray in the mosques and be good neighbors to the people. Be upright in your promises and go to people's funerals," urged Jaʿfar. "For surely, you need people and no one can do without others" [*Amali,* 118].

Generosity, self-sacrifice, and compassion were traits that Jaʿfar modeled as much as he taught, and they were a hallmark of his reputation. But he acknowledged that living them out could be a challenge. He is recorded as having said, "Three of the most difficult things to do are to treat people the same as yourself such that there's nothing you want from anyone except what they have

desired, to share your wealth equally with your brother, and to remember God in all situations" [*Amali,* 122]. Jaʿfar's vision of Islam and his understanding of the teachings of Muhammad were rooted in a commitment to community. And while he advocated for and held himself to high moral standards, he was known to be forgiving and lenient when his students struggled. This strengthened his bond with his disciples and helped earn him their trust.

Establishing Grounds for Authority: Knowledge (*ʿilm*)

Religious authority required not only pious living, but also sufficient knowledge. Jaʿfar knew that he needed to provide an intellectual defense for his moral vision, one that demonstrated it to be the most authentic and accurate understanding of Qurʾanic teachings. In turn, his interpretation of the Qurʾan had to be based on accurate knowledge of the lifestyle of the Prophet and his companions. Familiarity with the body of stories about the Prophet, transmitted by those who had known him personally, was the educational standard of the day. A story or account about the Prophet is commonly referred to as *hadith.* Collections of these short stories and anecdotes containing the words and deeds of the Prophet have played an important role in shaping Islamic theology and jurisprudence. Participants in nearly every political and religious debate were expected to demonstrate that their claims were in harmony with the example of the Prophet by citing relevant hadith. But because so many stories were spread around, many of which were known to be fabricated, scholars also needed to demonstrate that they received their knowledge of an account from a reliable source.

Given his bloodline and the circumstances of his life, Jaʿfar had no difficulty demonstrating that he was in a position to receive and absorb a wealth of stories about the Prophet's life. Most of his education took place within the confines of his family, especially his father's side, which was at the core of the *ahl al-bayt.* It should be noted, however, that Jaʿfar's mother was a descendant of Abu Bakr through both of her parents. In reference to this fact, Jaʿfar was known to say, "Abu Bakr bore me twice" [Crow, 56]. This willingness to claim the first caliph's legacy may come as a surprise given the fact that ʿAlids frequently blamed Abu Bakr and Umar for usurping ʿAli's right to the caliphate. The legacies of ʿAli and Abu Bakr had been at odds for decades, interwoven in bitter rivalries and invoked by opposing sides of political struggles. The Umayy-

ads had occasionally mandated public condemnations of ʿAli as a way of suppressing ʿAlid loyalist movements, and ʿAlid agitators often cursed the names of Abu Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthman.

Jaʿfar's respect for both Abu Bakr and ʿAli flew in the face of nascent societal impulses that pitted the legacies of the two figures against each other. On numerous occasions, Jaʿfar spoke positively of Abu Bakr, and there is no good reason to assume he was being disingenuous. One medieval historian recalled Jaʿfar's frustration with the emerging antipathies, quoting his remark, "I'm tired of people saying anything negative about Abu Bakr and ʿUmar" [Suyuti, 148]. That is not to say that Jaʿfar had no disagreements with the first caliphs, but any disapproval of them seems to have been overshadowed by his concern with the ulterior motives and arrogance that festered beneath others' censure of them. As he explained to his students,

> The most beneficial of all things for a man is that he recognize his own shortcomings before other people .... Do not be angry and contentious. But humble yourself by bearing with those who oppose you, those in authority over you, and those who have greater merit than you. Recognize their merit so that you don't clash with them. The one who doesn't appreciate the merit in others is conceited. [Kulayni, VIII, 243]

Jaʿfar seems to have practiced what he preached in this regard, placing himself under the tutelage of those outside the *ahl al-bayt*, not just those within. He studied under al-Qasim ibn Muhammad, the grandson of Abu Bakr and a prominent scholar of Islamic law in Medina. In this way Jaʿfar acted as a voice of moderation in pro-ʿAlid circles, and he seems to have made attempts to bridge the gap between rival families, as had his father and grandfather before him. This is one of the reasons Jaʿfar had such broad appeal and attracted students unconnected to ʿAlid activist movements.

Nonetheless, Jaʿfar's scholarly reputation was staked primarily on the learning he received from his father's family. This heritage connected him to the powerful legacies of Husayn, ʿAli, and Fatima, and Jaʿfar believed that the *ahl al-bayt* was his most reliable source of knowledge. The guidance received from his father and paternal grandfather went beyond academic lessons. It was training in a holistic way of life and spirituality passed down through a

chain of familial relationships going back to the Prophet. In Jaʿfar's view, the knowledge preserved and transmitted by his family included an understanding of the Qurʾan and the Prophet that transcended the short anecdotes circulating in study circles. "Religious scholars are heirs of the prophets," Jaʿfar argued. "The prophets did not bequeath a sum of money, but they passed on accounts of their customs. Whoever attains a share from these [accounts] has received the richest portion. So look at where you get your knowledge. This [inheritance of knowledge] is in us, the family of the Prophet Muhammad" [Kulayni, I:32]. Jaʿfar's conviction that his family's knowledge was unique made him unreceptive to other teachers' claims of having greater knowledge of the Qurʾan and the Prophet than the *ahl al-bayt.* In one story, Jaʿfar was speaking with a group of people from Kufa who talked about scholars they knew in Kufa that claimed to have accurate knowledge about the Prophet Muhammad and claimed that the descendants of the Prophet's family didn't know anything about the Prophet. Jaʿfar was incredulous. "The revelation was revealed in our homes! And it was from us that people learned about it," he retorted. "Now they claim to have knowledge and guidance, and that we are the ones ignorant and in error? It's preposterous" [*Amali,* 79].

Islamic Law's Formative Years

The emergence of the *ʿulama,* the body of religious scholars of Islam, set the stage for the development of the various schools of legal thought. In later centuries, the *ʿulama*'s general agreement that all four prominent, non-Shiʿa schools of law were acceptable ways of interpreting Islamic teachings helped define the boundaries of Sunni Islam. Each of these four schools – Hanafi, Malaki, Shafiʿi, and Hanbali – have roots in the eighth century context in which Jaʿfar lived, and they have been the primarily lenses through which Muslim scholars have negotiated religious questions in times since. Jaʿfar's impact on the early development of these schools is worth considering, but first a discussion of the issues being debated in his time is in order.

Each of the four Sunni schools of law developed its own approach to *fiqh*. This domain of scholarship is commonly translated as Islamic law, though it is a more expansive category than law in common western usage. *Fiqh* concerns humankind's responsibility before God, and it encompasses everything from dietary habits to

commerce, from private affairs of the family to questions of governance. It is broader than the domain of the state, and scholars did not assume that the all or even most matters within the category of *fiqh* would be enforced or adjudicated by the government. Instead, the *ʿulama* sought to provide consistent, systematic guidance for believers who wished to live their lives in light of the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad.

The Qurʾan is a relatively short text with few explicit directives on practical matters, and from the very early history of Islam onwards, community leaders looked to the example of the Prophet's life and those of his companions for guidance on how believers were to act. By the eighth century, different ritual practices and interpretive methods had proliferated, challenging the vision of a unified Muslim community. Supporters of Abu Bakr and ʿUmar often based their religious recommendations on precedents set by those two caliphs along with the Prophet, while ignoring the examples of ʿUthman or ʿAli. For their part, followers of ʿAli typically viewed his example as more authoritative than that of the other caliphs. Still others argued that the only reliable source of guidance was the example of the Prophet's life.

These differences point to a debate over authoritative sources. All agreed that the Qurʾan was authoritative, and most assumed that stories passed down over generations containing details of the lives of the Prophet and his companions were also sources of guidance. There was little agreement, however, about which stories from the past were reliable and whose example (other than the Prophet's) was to be trusted. Hundreds of thousands of anecdotes and stories about the Prophet and his companions were circulating at the elite and popular levels, and the *ʿulama* recognized that many, or even most, of the accounts being spread were altered, exaggerated, or fabricated entirely. No clear or consistent method had yet emerged to distinguish authentic from unreliable hadith accounts. Thus anachronistic or contradictory statements attributed to the Prophet in support or opposition of a given city, faction, or revolutionary movement were sources of great confusion.

In addition to being divided on the issue of authoritative sources, legal scholars disagreed on the role of inductive and speculative reasoning. The controversy surrounding the use of reason (*ʿaql*) was not a question of deductive logic, upon which everyone relied. Instead, it was a question of when and how a person might

draw conclusions that went beyond the literal meaning of a text. The Qurʾan may contain only a limited number of explicit commands, but it is a natural source of principles and guidelines. Deriving these, however, requires the exercise of personal interpretation and opinion (*raʾy*), which leads to different conclusions and applications. As familiarity with Greek philosophy became more widespread in the eighth and ninth centuries, Muslim philosophers began to take liberties as they constructed arguments that went far beyond, or even directly contradicted, more literal readings of religious texts. Some scholars were deeply troubled by the ever-increasing divergences of opinion as their peers used analogies and inductive logic to reach unprecedented conclusions. Even those who conceded that such reasoning might sometimes be beneficial or necessary had serious questions regarding who had the authority to offer believers explicit religious guidance based on foundational sacred texts. Issuing religious rulings was a weighty affair, and the fear of being held accountable by God for misguiding the populace kept many a scholar from venturing too far from literal readings of the most reliable sources.

Several centuries passed before any level of agreement on these matters emerged. Even then, each of the four schools later accepted in the Sunni tradition had its own methodology of interpretation. The Zaydi, Ismaʿili, and Twelver Shiʿa traditions also developed unique schools of interpretive thought. In the eighth century, however, common guidelines for interpretation were still far from settled, and a breadth of perspectives existed that became nearly unthinkable in later times. The boundaries of what most Muslims leaders believed was proper Islamic thought (or what we might call an orthodoxy) had not yet coalesced. Islamic interpretive traditions could have developed very differently had the ʿAbbasid revolution failed, for example, had the Fatimid Empire conquered Baghdad, or any number of other historical contingencies. Neither the course of Islamic legal thinking nor the development of polarized categories like Sunni and Shiʿa were predetermined or visible on the eighth century horizon.

The quest for reliable information about the Prophet and authentic interpretation of the Qurʾan boosted the significance of Medina in the eighth century. The city was home to a community widely believed to have best preserved the memory of the prophet, and believers traveled there from across the Muslim world to learn

about the Prophet and his life. Jaʿfar al-Sadiq conferred and debated with many of the scholars who came through the city. Some sat in on his study circles in the mosque, having sought him out as one of the most revered leaders of the *ahl al-bayt*. Many of the most influential thinkers of the day spent time with Jaʿfar. Wasil ibn ʿAta, a famous early theologian and a disciple of Hasan al-Basri, studied with Jaʿfar and other ʿAlids in Medina, honing his ideas and teachings before returning to his home town of Basra. Another eminent thinker of the time, Sufyan al-Thawri of Kufa, studied with Jaʿfar in Medina before charting a system of legal thought and interpretation that survived as its own school for some time. Other prominent figures who spent time with Jaʿfar include Shuʿba ibn Hajjaj, Ibn Jurayj, al-Awzaʿi, Malik ibn Anas, and Abu Hanifa. The last two names, however, deserve some extra attention. Given their fame and their enduring impact on Sunni thought, it is worth exploring the connection of each to Jaʿfar and his teachings. Because of the entwinement of all three men in contentious historical and religious affairs, questions of influence are fraught and deserve careful treatment.

Malik ibn Anas

The Maliki school is one of the four prominent Sunni schools of law, and as its name indicates, it emerged from the thought of Malik ibn Anas. Malik was a contemporary of Jaʿfar who lived most of his life in Medina. Like Jaʿfar, Malik came from a family of notable scholars and likely began advanced studies at a young age. Little is known for certain about Malik's life. As is the case with most revered figures from this time period (and many others), the stories told about him grew increasingly fantastical as the centuries went on. He appears to have lent political support to at least some of the ʿAlids, which occasionally resulted in trouble with ʿAbbasid officials. By the end of his life in 796, however, he was widely respected and even ʿAbbasid officials came to him for consultation on matters.

Malik's most tangible contribution to Islamic thought is his book *al-Muwatta* (*The Beaten Path*). In Jaʿfar and Malik's lifetime, Arab Islamic scholarship was in transition. Prior to this time, religious teachings were almost always transmitted orally, but in the eighth century, scholars were gravitating more and more toward the use of the written word. As this transition occurred, many

were concerned about the impact book production might have on education and religion. In eighth-century Medina, most scholars and students used small notebooks mainly for lectures and to aid memorization and writing was even explicitly discouraged in a few study circles. Religious education was still conceptualized as a process of oral communication from teacher to student that strengthened the connection between mentor and novice. Teachers would often have students recite lessons back to them to check that they were properly remembered, and books were seen as a threat to the role of the teacher and a crutch that prevented students the kind of full mastery of material that memorization allowed. Some also worried that religious books might dilute the authority of the Qurʾan, the paradigmatic book of divine guidance.

Malik did not pen *al-Muwatta* himself, but it is a record of his own collection of hadith that he gave as lessons to his students who then passed on this body of knowledge to their own protégés. Eventually, but still within Malik's lifetime, several different versions were written down, making *al-Muwatta* one of the first known books of Islamic law. The work is a collection of hadith accounts told by Medinan leaders and was focused on the authority of Medinan traditions. The accounts it contains do not always go back to the Prophet alone. Instead, some are simply stories of other revered Medinan leaders or are accounts that simply demonstrate that a given practice was accepted by the Medinan community. Still other accounts in *al-Muwatta* are based merely on Malik's educated opinion. The fact that Malik based his teachings on the presumed reliability of the Medinan community (and in some cases on his own opinion) illustrates how religious authority was conceived in different ways in this early period of Islamic history.

Given Malik's good relations with ʿAlid families in Medina and the prominence of both Malik and Jaʿfar in Medinan scholarly circles of their time, it is almost certain that Jaʿfar had some influence on the teachings found in *al-Muwatta.* That said, Malik is believed to have studied with hundreds of scholars in his day. Nonetheless, most of those scholars are not cited as sources by Malik in *al-Muwatta*, while Jaʿfar is named as the source of multiple teachings in various versions of *al-Muwatta*, especially teachings related to the Hajj pilgrimage. Some of the accounts attributed directly to Jaʿfar by Malik are quite lengthy, which suggests that Malik took Jaʿfar's teachings seriously as he compiled his seminal work.

Abu Hanifa

Another major figure in early Islamic thought and contemporary of Jaʿfar was Abu Hanifa of Kufa. Abu Hanifa was a third-generation Muslim who earned his living as a silk merchant and manufacturer. After taking an interest in learning, he spent nearly two decades studying with an important Kufan jurist who came to regard Abu Hanifa as his prize student and heir to his scholarly legacy. Abu Hanifa did not write or dictate any complete books, but his teachings had wide-ranging impact. Two of his most famous pupils, Abu Yusuf and al-Shaybani, gave Abu Hanifa credit for formulating their methodology for deriving legal rulings. Their school of thought, the Hanafi school, eventually became one of the four Sunni legal traditions. In addition to formulating legal methodologies, Abu Hanifa articulated theological positions that had immense influence on Islamic thought.

Unlike many of his colleagues, Abu Hanifa did not travel to Mecca and Medina in search of authentic stories of the Prophet, but instead to escape government persecution. By the 740s, he had attracted significant attention as a scholar in Kufa, and the governor there sought to appoint him as a judge. Like many pious-minded Muslims of his generation, however, Abu Hanifa wanted nothing to do with the Umayyad government. He refused the position, and the Kufan governor had him flogged, after which he fled to Mecca. Like Malik ibn Anas, Abu Hanifa was favorably inclined towards ʿAlid contenders to the caliphate, and he continued to support them through the early ʿAbbasid period. After a decade's absence, he returned to ʿAbbasid-controlled Kufa, where he soon found himself in trouble once again, this time for his ʿAlid politics. He passed away in Baghdad in 767, reportedly while in prison.

During the ten years he spent in the Hijaz (the larger region containing Mecca and Medina), Abu Hanifa used his time among scholars to refine his perspectives. Numerous stories have been preserved of his interactions with Jaʿfar in Medina. The encounters described in these stories are plausible, though many of the accounts appear to have been fabricated by the followers of both men in later centuries. Nonetheless, the body of evidence suggests that Abu Hanifa spent time with Jaʿfar, though the nature of their interactions is difficult to determine. Advanced scholars often sat with one another, and learning typically went both ways. Debate

over theological and legal questions was common in many study circles, and Abu Hanifa was often remembered for his skill as a debater. Numerous stories hint at a friendly antagonism between Abu Hanifa and Jaʿfar, and some of the debates attributed to them take the form of humorous, back-and-forth attempts to outsmart one another. In one frequently-recalled story, Jaʿfar asked Abu Hanifa what should be done in the event a pilgrim breaks the canine teeth of a gazelle. This is an odd hypothetical, premised on the fact that hunting animals is forbidden to those on pilgrimage. When Abu Hanifa confessed that he wasn't sure, Jaʿfar informed him that gazelles do not have canine teeth, only incisors [Ibn Khallikan, I: 328]. The joke takes aim at Abu Hanifa's urban upbringing; as a city dweller, he lacked the knowledge of desert animals common among Arabs like Jaʿfar, whose family was rooted in a nomadic tradition more intimately connected to nature. Stories like this one may have sprung from imagination of Jaʿfar's followers, but they still provide a sense of the richness of interactions and debates in the period.

Whatever the exact nature of Abu Hanifa's relationship with Jaʿfar, the Kufan scholar returned to Iraq deeply impacted by his time with the scholars in Mecca and Medina. His thinking was notably more refined and developed when he returned to Kufa. Abu Hanifa's most famous and enduring contribution to Islamic legal methodology was his defense of analogical reasoning (*qiyas*). In the absence of clear Qurʾanic direction on a given matter, Abu Hanifa was comfortable using analogies and other types of inductive reasoning to formulate a ruling. Because of this, he was often criticized for relying on his own methods and justifications rather than the precedent of the Prophet, his companions, and his family. Nonetheless, Abu Hanifa's insistence on the value of drawing some conclusions based on analogy eventually won widespread acceptance among the Sunni schools of law, though adherents of other schools are more cautious in its application than the Hanafis.

Jaʿfar's Place in Sunni Legal Thought

Assessing Jaʿfar's impact on the development of Sunni legal traditions is a fraught endeavor. Over time, as Jaʿfar's name became more closely associated with Shiʿism, claims asserting his influence on Sunni legal thought became entwined with sectarian polemics. Shiʿa scholars' immense admiration for Jaʿfar at times led to highly

inflated descriptions of his impact, particularly on Malik ibn Anas and Abu Hanifa. The association between Jaʿfar and Shiʿism did his reputation no favors among later Sunni scholars, who for their part have been reluctant to accept claims about his impact on their legal traditions. Discerning historical fact from hagiographical flight and polemical fiction is a tricky affair, and at the end of the day, the precise impact of Jaʿfar on Sunni legal thought is impossible to ascertain. The topic is worth addressing, however, and the following points may illuminate Jaʿfar's role in this area as much as possible given the historical evidence available.

As outlined above, Jaʿfar interacted with influential scholars of his day, and his position as an ʿAlid patriarch and his reputation as his father's son meant that his opinions carried weight in that environment. Malik ibn Anas transmitted accounts he received from Jaʿfar, and Abu Hanifa likely did as well, and these men formulated legal methodologies that shaped the course of Sunni thought. That said, later Sunni legal texts contain scant documentation of Jaʿfar's teachings, which cautions us from making too much of his role in the development of Sunni law.

However, Jaʿfar does appear as an authority in canonical Sunni hadith collections. By the ninth and tenth centuries, most scholars agreed that religious guidance should be derived from the customs and sayings of the Prophet himself, rather than those of his companions, family, or other groups. A scholar known as al-Shafiʿi is often credited with formulating the rationale for this more limited conception of authoritative hadith, but subsequent generations of Malikis, Hanafis, and later Hanbalis largely concurred on this point. Scholars who provided religious guidance to the Muslim community needed a corpus of reliable accounts about the Prophet that would serve as an authoritative resource in their search for precedence as they made legal rulings on practical matters. This need was met by the Sunni hadith collections: volumes of accounts about the Prophet assembled in the early centuries of Islamic history. Over time, six of these collections from the ninth and early tenth centuries achieved widespread acceptance as reliable (*sahih*). The collectors of these *sahih* works went to great lengths to try to verify the trustworthiness of all of the sources to whom each individual account was credited. As part of this process of verification, classical Islamic scholars compiled collective biographies of early Muslim figures in which the character of those who trans-

mitted hadith was painstakingly assessed.

Given the importance of these six *sahih* Sunni collections, it is noteworthy that Jaʿfar appears as a transmitter in five of them. He also appears in many Sunni collective biographies, which cast him as a praiseworthy and reliable figure. Highly respected medieval Sunni scholars like Ibn Hajar and al-Dhahabi defended Jaʿfar's character and trustworthiness, and some of them imply that Jaʿfar influenced Malik ibn Anas, Abu Hanifa, and others. However, in light of Jaʿfar's familial relationship with the Prophet, his role as a respected teacher, and the high estimation of his character by most Sunni authorities, it is somewhat surprising how rarely he appears as a transmitter in the Sunni hadith collections. R. P. Buckley estimates that Jaʿfar appears only eighty to ninety times in the *sahih* collections, which together contain tens of thousands of accounts [Buckley, 42].

Two main factors likely contributed to the paucity of traditions credited to Jaʿfar. The first, mentioned briefly above, is that Jaʿfar's name was associated with groups that contributed to the growing polarization between Sunni and Shiʿa scholarship. As Sunni scholars assembled the *sahih* hadith collections in the ninth century, a number of groups considered by those scholars to be heretical were claiming Jaʿfar as the originator of their ideas. In a telling account, a medieval scholar relates that an ʿAbbasid jurist was asked why some considered Jaʿfar unreliable. The jurist explained that some people had made up heretical nonsense and attributed their wild theories to Jaʿfar. The jurist went on, however, to emphasize his own opinion of Jaʿfar, saying, "I swear Jaʿfar never said anything like that stuff. Jaʿfar was too pious and feared God too much for something like that. But when people heard these things [attributed to him] they began considering him an unreliable source. But if you ever saw Jaʿfar, you would realize he was unmatched among his peers" [Kashshi, 391]. Scholars assembling hadith collections may have considered Jaʿfar reliable, but issues of public perception may have scared them off from including many accounts attributed to him.

Jaʿfar's conception of religious authority may also lie behind his lack of prominence as a transmitter in the Sunni *sahih* hadith collections. As stated above, in the early eighth century, the consensus that accounts of the Prophet's deeds and sayings were uniquely authoritative had not yet formed. For his part, Malik

seemed to view accounts traced back to Medinan leaders as equally reliable, and Abu Hanifa utilized his Kufan sensibilities and a careful rational process to formulate religious guidance. Other views of religious authority were also prevalent in this period. Like most of the ʿ*ulama*, Jaʿfar believed that scholars had authority, and that the most knowledge and pious of them offered the most reliable guidance. At the top of this scholarly hierarchy, Jaʿfar argued, was the family of the Prophet, which had divinely inherited resources and skills that made them best suited to guide the Muslim community. As a rivalry emerged between those who relied solely on traditional "received" knowledge (namely the Qurʾan and hadith literature) and those who also relied on rational processes, Jaʿfar seems to have been blazing a third path. His vision of religious authority prioritized traditional knowledge, but for him, the category was broader than the Qurʾan and accounts of the Prophet's life and teachings. It also included the teachings of the leaders of the *ahl al-bayt.* As heirs to the Prophet's legacy, these figures had insight into the true meaning of the Qurʾan and the Prophet's teachings, and they could provide guidance that went beyond the literal meanings of received traditions.

In Jaʿfar's view, the teachings of his father and his grandfather, like his own teachings, did not need to be linked through a specific chain of transmitters to the Prophet in order to be authoritative. Instead, their familial connection to the prophet meant that their teachings were authoritative on their own. Indeed, Jaʿfar saw drawing distinctions between his own teachings and the Prophet's teachings as unnecessary. Jaʿfar is often quoted as saying, "My accounts are my father's accounts; my father's accounts are my grandfather's accounts; my grandfather's accounts are the accounts of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, ... [the accounts of ʿAli] are the accounts of the Prophet of God (may God bless him and his family); and the accounts of the Prophet of God is the word of God" [*Irshad,* II:186-187]. Because Jaʿfar considered his practices and teachings to be derived from his Prophetic lineage, he felt little need to cite a list of transmitters. This approach was not uncommon in his time, but as time passed, the emphasis on hadith being traced back to the prophet became more pronounced, and many scholars insisted that all authoritative rulings had to be tied explicitly to a reliably transmitted account of the Prophet. The chain of transmitters accompanying a given hadith was the tool by which schol-

ars attempted to discern authentic from fabricated stories. This standard of verification was firmly in place in the ninth and tenth centuries, and thus many of Jaʿfar's teachings were thus seen as unverifiable, causing them to be left out of many collections.

Though little can be said with certainty about Jaʿfar's impact on Sunni legal thought, he was clearly a part of conversations that shaped Sunni traditions. In fact, the historical Jaʿfar could easily be categorized alongside Malik ibn Anas, Abu Hanifa, or Sufyan al-Thawri as an important eighth century thinker, grappling with the intellectual and religious issues of the day, which helped lay the foundations for Islamic legal thought (Sunni and Shiʿa). If we remove the anachronistic lens of sectarian identity through which later generations have assessed these figures, we have little reason to evaluate Jaʿfar's contributions differently than those of his peers. His view of religious authority as vested in scholarship, piety, and the *ahl al-bayt* was unique, but it did not place him outside the intellectual mainstream of his time. Only in later generations did the followers of these intellectuals shape their masters' ideas into distinct schools of thought. The idea that a Muslim was either Sunni or Shiʿa did not yet exist, and scholarly divisions had not yet developed along those lines. Jaʿfar's circle included scholars who would shape both traditions.

Resistance to Theology

In a conversation with Jaʿfar, Abu Hanifa is said to have commented that a wise person is one who distinguishes between good and evil. But Jaʿfar preferred more nuance, defining a wise person as "one who distinguishes between two goods and two evils so he can choose the better of two goods and pick out the less of two evils" [ʿAttar, 50]. Though this story is likely apocryphal, it illustrates a theme common in accounts about Jaʿfar: he was not a black and white thinker. He avoided simplistic dichotomies and rejected many of the popular paradigms of his day. This trait is particularly evident in his approach to philosophical questions.

As outlined above, Islamic legal thought in the classical sense began to take shape in the eighth century. The same is true of philosophy and theology. The expansion of the Islamic landscape brought increased exposure to Greek philosophical traditions and to Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian thought. This caused a surge of interest in philosophical topics among educated Muslims, who embraced or

condemned philosophical thought to varying degrees. Given philosophical and theological positions were often associated with members of various factions and uprisings meant that those positions were political as well as religious in nature. In the ninth century, for example, the debate over whether or not the Qurʾan is eternal and uncreated reached its peak. The position that it was uncreated was also an anti-ʿAbbasid position, one that critiqued ʿAbbasid rulers for enforcing their own orthodoxy on their subjects.

Distinct philosophical schools had not yet developed in the Islamic circles of Jaʿfar's time, but certain philosophical questions had begun to be hotly debated. One of the most pressing, as mentioned in the previous chapter as well, was the question of free will. Unjust Umayyad policies and oppressive government tactics had been begrudgingly accepted by some as events that God had allowed to happen, and thus part of God's will. Pietistic activists like Hasan al-Basri, however, took the Umayyads to task for their tyranny, arguing that their actions were unacceptable and could not be shrugged off as the will of God. This, of course, carried with it the implicit assertion that human beings were capable of acting counter to God's will – an assertion seen by many as a denial of God's power to determine the course of history. Accepting human free will cast doubts on the doctrine of divine omnipotence. Hasan al-Basri's position was popular in some circles, especially among those who sought to overthrow unjust leadership, but many scholars considered those who took this position on free will, known as the Qadariyya, to be in error.

Controversy over Qadariyya positions and their implications for other doctrines began to polarize the scholarly community in which Jaʿfar lived. Conversations on these issues were divisive, but they also sparked reflections on the nature of knowledge, evidence, and belief that deeply impacted the course of Muslim theological and philosophical traditions. An entire generation of rationalist thinkers, including Hisham ibn Hakam, Muʾmin al-Taq, and Sufan al-Thawri, spent time studying with Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. In fact, Wasil ibn ʿAta, a vocal supporter of Hasan al-Basri's position on free will who studied with Jaʿfar in Medina, played an important role in shaping the first major theological tradition in Islam, the Muʿtazilite school.

Like his contemporaries, Jaʿfar was often asked to give his position on the debates of his time. In keeping with his reluctance

to align himself too closely with any political faction, he also declined to side explicitly with any group's philosophical outlook. As a prominent member of *ahl al-bayt*, Jaʿfar seems to have been very conscious of how easily his words could be utilized by various groups whose interests were of little concern to him. On the topic of human free will versus divine omnipotence, he famously insisted that the answer lay somewhere between the two. When faced with the question of whether the Qurʾan was created or uncreated, Jaʿfar said that it was both.

This tactic allowed Jaʿfar to evade the political implications of taking sides, but his reluctance to do so should not be reduced to political quietism, because he also seems to have been dissatisfied with the categories and binary lines of reasoning used by scholars in relation to these issues. Moreover, Jaʿfar expressed discomfort with the presumptuous attitudes of scholars who in his view were far too cavalier in their handling of questions related to God's nature and actions in the world. Simplistic claims about divine mysteries were dangerous and irresponsible. In this regard, Jaʿfar was on the same page as his more cautious peers who were skeptical of speculative theological reasoning. Jaʿfar was not opposed to all use of reason, as the next chapter will illustrate. Instead, he may simply have been bothered by dogmatism and simplistic answers. It was a trait Jaʿfar seemed to take from his father who once said,

> "Talk about the created world, but don't argue about God's being. Debating God's being produces nothing but confusion." These were sentiments Jaʿfar would echo, explaining to one of his students, "people are always trying to rationalize things, even to the point of arguing over God's being. When you hear this kind of thing, just say, 'There is no god except the One God, and nothing compares to Him.'" [Kulayni, I:92]

Healing Bodies

Instead of plunging into divisive arguments over the nature of God's being, Jaʿfar often focused on the healing powers of God's creation. He devoted considerable energy to medicine and physical therapy, which illustrates his holistic approach toward being a teacher and community leader. Jaʿfar was concerned not only with discerning good from evil and licit from illicit, but also healthy

from unhealthy. Driven by a desire to understand the body and properly care for it, Jaʿfar spent significant time studying and testing the effects of herbs, foods, and other medicinal items.

As in other cases, this interest of Jaʿfar's does not necessarily make him particularly unique among his peers. Other scholars at the time displayed similar interests. Nonetheless, caring for people's physical health is a hallmark of Jaʿfar's legacy, and one that is often overlooked in modern discussions of his life. "Paradise is sound health," he once explained [ʿAttar, 53]. As a teacher, Jaʿfar focused not only on what would serve human beings in the afterlife, but also what would serve them in this world. Most of his teachings on the subject of health are preserved in Twelver Shiʿa books devoted to the medical traditions of the imams. Over the centuries, scholars and teachers have collected Jaʿfar's advice on healthy habits, a wholesome diet, and proper ways of acting when sick and when dealing with sick people. The volume of traditions attributed to Jaʿfar on these subjects is greater than that attributed to other Shiʿa imams, which suggests that his level of interest in the topic was unique.

The breadth of topics covered in these collections is fascinating. Many stories they contain relate to what Jaʿfar ate and what he encouraged others to eat. Recommended foods include many fruits (dates, pomegranates, apples, melons) as well as specific vegetables, grains, and spices. These sources also list certain foods to avoid, pork, alcohol, and carrion in particular, but other less obvious ones as well. Similar collections of hadith containing the Prophet Muhammad's health recommendations can be found in Sunni traditions.

Perhaps more interesting, however, are the many stories containing Jaʿfar's teachings on how to cure a range of illnesses and ailments. No bodily function or fluid is taboo, and Jaʿfar had recommendations for women in childbirth, advice on how to reduce flatulence, and suggestions for men seeking to increase their virility and sperm count. In many cases, Jaʿfar suggested remedies that combined the consumption of specific foods with prayers or Qurʾanic recitations. Once, when asked how to treat a person experiencing general weakness of the body, Jaʿfar said, "Let him eat mutton with milk. It will expel from his limbs every illness and danger and will strengthen his body and harden his gums." Jaʿfar added that the person should recite the following Qurʾanic

verse ten times: "There is not god except the One who controls life and death" (7:158). This was to be followed by a recitation of the Throne verse (2:255) and Sura al-Ikhlas (112) [*Medical*, 76-77]. The use of the Qurʾan in this manner, especially the repetition of the name of God as a protection against spiritual and physical dangers, is prevalent throughout Jaʿfar's medicinal recommendations.

Although modern medicine has largely replaced traditional treatments like those found in Jaʿfar's teachings, interest in traditional medicine has persisted into the present time. Over the last several decades, as part of a broader interest in herbal and alternative medicine, many members of contemporary Shiʿa communities have turned to traditional techniques taught by Jaʿfar. A number of books, many of which are published in Iran, feature a combination of modern self-help advice and traditional medicine. In the summer of 2016, when Olympic swimmers in Rio de Janeiro appeared on television prominently displaying circular bruises made by the practice of cupping, Iranians were quick to point out that this practice had been advocated by Jaʿfar [Kulayni, VIII: 273]. Many of those who follow Jaʿfar's religious teachings today also hold his instructions for bodily health in high regard.

Conclusion

Jaʿfar al-Sadiq will long be remembered for his contributions to Islamic legal thought, in large part due to the vast number of accounts attributed to him in later Shiʿa traditions and to the fact that the Twelver Shiʿa school of law bears his name. The significant and explicit dependence of Shiʿa legal schools on his teachings, however, has done mixed service to his legacy, as it has helped obscure his broader impact on the Islamic tradition as a whole. The precise nature of his influence on the Sunni legal tradition is impossible to reconstruct, but he was a major figure in intellectual discourse in one of the most formative scholarly contexts of early Islamic history. His encounters with Malik ibn Anas, Abu Hanifa, Sufyan al-Thawri, and other major thinkers are well documented, and Jaʿfar can easily be categorized alongside these men who helped shape Muslim intellectual history more broadly.

Jaʿfar's approach to many issues of his day was conciliatory. In his professional capacity as a scholar and teacher, he was called upon to address the most controversial topics of his day. Nonetheless, he repeatedly avoided divisive issues that might distract

from what he believed to be more important teachings. His oft-cited political quietism, his refusal to involve himself in Umayyad or ʿAbbasid affairs (or in revolutions aimed at their overthrow), mirrors his reluctance to takes sides in popular religious and theological debates like the origin of the Qurʾan, the extent of human free will, the authority of reasoned knowledge, and the nature of God's being. In each of these debates, he drew from arguments on both sides to stake out a middle ground, declining to identify with one group over another. His unifying impulse can also be seen in his disdain for the practice of cursing Abu Bakr and ʿUmar, even as he insisted on the centrality of ʿAli's family lineage. Jaʿfar was not unwilling to take stands, but he clearly exercised prudence when it came to public discussion of controversial issues.

The range of issues being negotiated by the Muslim community in Jaʿfar's time was immense. Fundamental questions of religious authority and knowledge were at stake, the implications of the Prophet's teachings were being debated, and scholars, pietists, and activists argued over what it meant to be Muslim in the most basic sense. Jaʿfar's contributions must be understood in this context: he, too, was negotiating these matters in scholarship and in praxis. His refusal to take sides on many political and theological issues carried with it the implicit or explicit judgment that these matters were less consequential than many believed, and that devoting significant energy to them was prideful and misguided. More important than abstract theological questions was the performance of one's duties before God, patient service to the community, and above all, humility. Commitment to spiritual practice in day-to-day life, believed Jaʿfar, was the highest form of faithfulness to the teachings of Muhammad and the meaning of the Qurʾanic revelation. This was the perspective he received from his family, borne out of their intimate connection to the Prophet's personal life. Jaʿfar welcomed the students who followed his leadership in these matters into his inner circle, where he revealed divine mysteries and taught the hidden meanings of the Qurʾan.

Selected Quotes Attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq

Sunni hadith collections commonly cite traditions transmitted by Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on topics of ritual significance, such as prayer and pilgrimage. Malik ibn Anas, for example has numerous accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's detailed practices of the Hajj pilgrim-

age that are related on the authority of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. One short example:

> Malik [ibn Anas] from Jaʿfar [al-Sadiq] from his father that Jabir ibn ʻAbdullah said, "I saw the messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, hastening from the Black Stone until he reached it again, three times. Malik said, "This is what is still done by the people of knowledge in our city (Madina). [*Muwatta*, 146]

Here, Malik ibn Anas has received a report directly from Jaʿfar al-Sadiq regarding one of the Prophet's specific practices during the Hajj ritual and follows that tradition with an affirmation that the experts in Madina (of which Jaʿfar was clearly one of the main representatives in the eyes of Malik ibn Anas) continue the practice.

Al-Nasa'i (d. 915), another collector of one of the most important and authoritative Sunni collections of hadith, also has multiple stories of the Prophet based on Jaʿfar's authority, such as this one:

> The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) traveled until he came to ʻArafah, where he found that the tent had pitched for him. He stayed there until the sun had passed its zenith, then he called for Al-Qaswa' which was saddled for him. When he reached the bottom of the valley he addressed the people. Then Bilal called the Adhan, then the Iqamah, then he prayed Zuhr, then he called the Iqamah, then he prayed ʻAsr, and he did not offer any other prayer in between. [Nasa'i, 1:355-356]

Jaʿfar's own unique approaches to topics can often be seen more clearly in a small collection of teachings attributed to him, *Lantern of the Path* (*Misbah al-shariʿa*). On attitudes toward prayer, for example, he is quoted saying,

> Know that Allah (SWT) does not need your service. He is independent of you, your worship and your supplication. He summons you by His favor to show you mercy, to put you far from His punishment, to spread some of the blessings of His kindness over you, to guide you to the path of His pleasure, and to open to you the door of His forgiveness. If Allah (SWT) had created what He created in the

> universe many times over, forever without end, it would still be the same to Allah (SWT) whether they all rejected Him or united with Him. All that He has from the worship of creatures is the display of His generosity and power. Therefore make modesty your cloak and incapacity your shawl. Enter under the throne of the power of Allah (SWT), and you will capture the benefits of His lordship, seeking help in Him and asking for His succour. [*Lantern*, 51]

Jaʿfar is often remembered making connections between the bodily rituals of worship and ethical practices and moral behavior. In another section from *Lantern of the Path*, Jaʿfar is quoted discussing the purpose and merits of cleaning one's teeth as the Prophet was known to have done, making a connection between physical and moral purity:

> As you remove the stains caused by food and drink from your teeth with the siwak, so remove the impurity of your wrong actions by humble entreaty, humility, night prayers, and asking for forgiveness before dawn. Purify your outer being from impurities, and your inner being from the turbidity of acts of opposition and committing anything prohibited, all the while acting sincerely for Allah (SWT). The Holy Prophet (peace upon him and his family) made its use an example for people for alertness and attention, in that the siwak is a clean, soft plant and the twig of a blessed tree. The teeth are what Allah (SWT) created in the mouth as a tool for eating, and implement for chewing, a reason for enjoying food and for keeping the intestines in order. The teeth are pure jewels, which become dirty because they are present when food is chewed, leading to deterioration in the way the mouth smells, and decay in the gums. When the intelligent believer cleans with the soft plant and wipes it on these pure jewels, he removes the decay and adulteration from them and they then revert to their original state .... Similarly, Allah (SWT) created the heart pure and clean. [*Lantern*, 70]

Concern for the body and physical health, in addition to spiritual health, is common in the teachings ascribed to Jaʿfar. He is said to have categorized traditional Arab medical treatments in to five

groups:

> The medicine of the Arabs is of five kinds: cupping, clysters, inhaling medications, vomiting, steam baths, and the final remedy is cauterization. [*Medical*, 64]

In response to most questions about how to treat various ailments, Jaʿfar often foregrounded the spiritual and advised specific prayers or recitations. When asked about treating an unspecified mental disorder, Jaʿfar gives this advice:

> Recite this prayer when you go to bed: "In the name of Allah, and by Allah. I believe in Allah, and disbelieve in the idols. O Allah, protect me in my sleep and my wakening. I take refuge in the might of Allah and His magnificence from that which I suffer and fear." [*Medical*, 139]

But Jaʿfar also passed along more concrete medical suggestions as well. For a quartan fever, he told someone to "grind sugar and add it to water. Drink it on an empty stomach whenever you want a drink of water" [*Medical*, 58]. For indigestion, he recommended a student to, "eat the morning meal and the evening meal, and do not eat anything in between" [*Medical*, 70]. To a man complaining of vitiligo and leprosy, Jaʿfar told him to "enter the steam bath and mix henna with lime and coat your body with it" [*Medical*, 86]. Tending to the spiritual and physical needs of his followers and students was something he clearly taught as virtuous and full of rewards:

> If a believing person visits a believing patient in his illness in the morning, seventy thousand angels escort him, and when he sits down, mercy covers him altogether .... If his visit takes place in the evening, similar things happen for him until the next morning. [Kulayni, 3:103]

Chapter III: Searching the Inner Secrets

He who is submersed in the ocean of knowledge has no need for shallow waters;
he who has ascended to the peak of truth has no fear of falling.
Shahrastani in his description of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, *Milal,* 133

Medina is not the only town with a grave for Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. Befitting his wide appeal among later generations of Muslims and the competing claims to his legacy, an additional shrine marking the burial of Jaʿfar can be found today in southwest China. In a region just west of the modern Chinese city of Hotan, the ancient Kingdom of Khotan served as a key trading city linking East Asia to central and south Asian lands and the Middle East. Though primarily a Buddhist area for many centuries, Muslims were in most positions of power following the Turkic Central Asian tribes' conquest of the area in the early eleventh century. But even before the conquests, Muslims were a growing part of the Kingdom of Khotan due to its location along the Silk Road trade routes. Local traditions in the area claim that Jaʿfar al-Sadiq had traveled to the region in the eighth century, defending the Muslim communities on the frontiers and teaching the meaning of Islam to new converts. For centuries, Muslims have visited the shrine to commemorate his life and to recall his wisdom. When Aurel Stein, a British-Hungarian archaeologist, visited the region in the early twentieth century to excavate some of the ruins of the ancient kingdom, he commented on the large number of pilgrims regularly participating visiting Jaʿfar's shrine [Stein, 266-267].

While few historical records lend support to the notion that Jaʿfar died in the Kingdom of Khotan, the presence of his name among the Muslim worshippers in Central Asia should come as no surprise. Along the same paths used for trade with distant empires, Muslim mystics were particularly known for their travels across the frontiers. In many cases, Buddhist and Hindu communities

Pilgrims returning from Jaʿfar's Shrine in Khotan
(Source: Stein, 269)

first encountered Islam throughout the stories and preaching of Muslim mystics. Often referred to as Sufis, these spiritual-oriented Muslims gravitated toward ascetic lifestyles, training their bodies to crave a permanent life with God rather than the fleeting pleasures of the physical world. Sometimes they were organized into fraternities or guilds; others preferred their own paths of spirituality. As a whole, they were instrumental in the growth and spread of Islam into Central Asia, South Asia, and China, especially on the popular level. For most of Islamic history, mysticism and spirituality has been a central feature of Muslim religious life in communities from Spain to Indonesia. Many of the most renowned Muslim scholars, poets, and preachers have been immersed in Islamic spirituality which profoundly shaped their religious thinking. And it is among those treasured traditions of the great Muslim saints of history that Jaʿfar's name was most widely spread.

During the lifetime of Jaʿfar, as Islamic legal discourse was beginning to take some shape, alternative ways of thinking and talking about the meaning of Islam and human responsibility were also developing. Whereas legal scholars tended to focus on the task of distinguishing the permissible from the illicit based upon specific transmitted traditions. Other Muslim leaders emphasized the broader moral vision of the Qurʾan and the Prophet. These were not irreconcilable approaches, of course. And Jaʿfar,

like many of his contemporaries, were interested in both. There is little doubt, for instance, that Jaʿfar was concerned with teaching proper religious requirements and avoidances and he regularly cited traditions to support his understanding. But there is equally little doubt that Jaʿfar's emphasis in his teaching was elsewhere. He did not focus on collecting his family's teachings that had been handed down to him and recording them into a volume of dictums. Rather, he focused his energies on exploring a different kind of religious knowledge, a lived and embodied knowledge of God that came from the heart.

For Jaʿfar, the human intellect (*ʿaql*) was a powerful faculty, an endowed gift that God created and bestowed upon humankind to discern truth from falsehood, good from evil. Rather than being a periphery aspect of religion, sound intellect was the backbone of religious thinking upon which Islam relied. Without the intellect, religious instruction could easily become corrupted or misconstrued. In one account, Jaʿfar warned his students, "The Prophet of God taught, 'if you see a man who prays and fasts a lot, do not follow him until you look at the quality of his intellect (*ʿaql*)" [Kulayni, I: 26]. This meant that religious knowledge and religious authority had to be predicated on more than just the performance of received traditions; it demanded wisdom and spiritual discernment that could see the true meaning and application of the Qurʾan beyond the surface readings. These two types of knowledge – the transmitted knowledge of hadith (often referred to as *ʿilm*) and the discerning knowledge of the intellect (*ʿaql*) – went hand in hand for Jaʿfar. Together, they were the basis from which Jaʿfar explored the hidden spiritual truths of divine revelation.

The Pure Heart

The common translation of *ʿaql* as "intellect" is somewhat misleading in this context. The term played an important role in later Muslim philosophical discourse and was associated in the faculties of logic and reason. But in the teachings of Jaʿfar, *ʿaql* was not synonymous with the rationality of the mind, but rather the understanding from within. Amir-Moezzi has described this notion of *ʿaql* as "an innate faculty of transcendent knowledge" [Amir-Moezzi, 8]. It was a kind of knowledge of the heart. Although ʿaql was a gift of God to all humanity, not everyone had the same capabilities. The prophets of God throughout history, for example, were

understood by Jaʿfar to have had unique abilities with their intellect. This helped safeguard divine revelation from misunderstanding and misapplication. Only a perfected human intellect based on a pure heart could receive divine communication reliably. By emphasizing his understanding of the intellect, Jaʿfar again reinforced the inseparable relationship between true piety and religious authority.

The intellect was a guide to a life of piety as an inward focused activity for Jaʿfar, a discipline that required self-examination and humility. "It does not benefit a servant of God to make a display of his good work while secretly doing evil," Jaʿfar argued [*Amali,* 133]. Simply doing the right action was not enough. It was essential to cultivate knowledge from the heart that led to repentance and love. The emphasis on the heart as the place from which understanding and discernment grow is a theme found in many of the different accounts of Jaʿfar's teaching. "Through hearts God unlocks guidance," Jaʿfar was remembered teaching [*Gems,* 33]. This way of the heart was not extraneous to Islam or something for the elite; it was at the very core of Jaʿfar's understanding of what it mean to be Muslim. The "straight path" of the Prophet was, in Jaʿfar's words, "a way from the heart to God through turning away from that which is other than Him" [*Gems,* 35].

The heart, therefore, was the place from which the intellect could recognize divine truths and divine guidance. It was not regarded as a simple symbol for emotion, but a way of thinking about spiritual realities and coming to perceive the divine. Jaʿfar once taught a story about ʿAli b. Abi Talib who was asked if he had seen God. Cryptically, ʿAli responded, "I would not have worshipped a Lord whom I could not see." When asked to explain, ʿAli continued, "eyes cannot see Him in a witnessing process but hearts see Him through the realities of belief" [Kulayni, I: 84]. Although abstract, the knowledge and perception of the heart had to be translated into action. This was not an ecstatic state disconnected from real world engagement. Controlling the passions of the body was critical. "How often being patient for a moment can produce enduring joy, and how frequently a moment's indulgence produces extended grief," Jaʿfar taught [*Amali,* 33].

Among the stories most widely told about Jaʿfar among later generations of pious Muslims were the accounts of his generosity. The famous tenth century Shafiʿi scholar, al-Qushayri, recounted a

story of someone coming to Jaʿfar and mistakenly accusing Jaʿfar of having stolen his money. Seeing the distress of the man, Jaʿfar resisted the desire to defend himself against the accusation; instead he went to his own house to retrieve the amount stolen and gave it to the man. When the traveler later realized Jaʿfar had not stolen the money, he tried to give it back, but Jaʿfar insisted the man keep it as a gift [Qushayri, 220]. While many of these kinds of stories are likely apocryphal, they represent the kind of reputation that Jaʿfar had acquired. Kindness, generosity, and respect of his neighbors were all central to Jaʿfar's understanding of Islam. His scholarship was an outworking of his personal devotion to God rooted in a knowledge of the heart.

Knowledge of the Unseen

While core virtues such as patience, kindness, charity, and humility formed the backbone Jaʿfar's conception of piety, he believed there was much more to learn. The trained intellect, grounded in a pure heart, could begin to recognize and understand more subtle and hidden realities of revelation. Among the pious, those with exceptional knowledge were able to uncover mysteries that went beyond the surface levels of meaning. Jaʿfar was not the first to explore the ways in which ideas could be true on multiple levels with layers of meanings. Most simply put, for some early Muslim thinkers there was both an inner and out dynamic to all knowledge. One could perform the outer, physical rituals of prayer, for instance, without realizing or contemplating the inner spiritual dimensions of it. Although considered taboo among other religious scholars, Jaʿfar inherited a family tradition of reflecting on these inner meanings and he spent a good portion of his career attempting to convey them to his students.

In one account, Jaʿfar told his followers a story about the angel Gabriel coming to the Prophet Muhammad with two pomegranates. The Prophet ate one of them and then broke the other one into halves. One portion he kept for himself and the other he handed to ʿAli to eat. He asked ʿAli if he knew what they were, and ʿAli did not. The Prophet then explained, "The first was prophethood, in which you have to part; but the other was knowledge, and in that you are my partner." When asked to clarify, Jaʿfar elaborated, saying, "God did not teach Muhammad anything without ensuring that [Muhammad] taught it to ʿAli as well" [Kulayni, I:263]. The

anecdote was not focused on making a historical claim but on explaining his claim on religious knowledge. This was a story Jaʿfar's father used to tell as well, and like his father, Jaʿfar believed they had inherited a unique gift and a divine calling. This inheritance of knowledge went beyond the rules and requirements of Islamic law. It was an ability to discern inner meanings of revelation and a duty to guide others to that meaning.

This knowledge of inner spiritual realities is often referred to as *maʿrifa*, sometimes translated as gnosis. Here again, this may be more of a backward projection of later Muslim philosophers and theologians who would develop technical terminology for philosophical concepts. But it does appear that Jaʿfar had a clear emphasis on a similar type of inner knowledge. The God who made the heavens and earth, explained Jaʿfar, also "made the hearts of His friends the dwelling place of His spiritual knowledge" [*Gems,* 109]. It was a part of the created order and the means by which God guides his people. The most important place where this inner knowledge would be put to use was in explicating the meanings of the Qurʾanic revelation.

Inner Meanings of the Qurʾan

In a commentary on the Qurʾan, the medieval scholar al-Shahrastani quoted Jaʿfar al-Sadiq: "God manifests Himself to His servants through His Scripture" [*Keys,* 157]. For many scholars of the Qurʾan, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's way of teasing out layers of meanings in the Qurʾan helped pave the way for an entire method of studying the sacred text. The first century of Muslim piety was profoundly shaped by the emphasis on the Qurʾan as the words of God. But the way in which the Qurʾan's sacred power was most commonly put to use was through recitation. It played a central role in nearly all ritual acts, especially ritual prayer (*salat*) in which portions of the Qurʾan are always recited. The aural nature of the Qurʾanic revelation was central, and hearing the Qurʾan recited was a unifying liturgical experience. The aesthetic qualities of the Qurʾan, therefore, were in some ways more emphasized than the didactic lessons or discursive meanings of the text. As Islamic traditions began to develop, however, the Qurʾan was increasingly being called upon to serve as a source for judicial and religious rulings. The growing emphasis on the normative guidelines set forth in the Qurʾan helped to inspire the development of extensive commentaries on the Qurʾan. What

had been sporadic explications of Qurʾanic passages by teachers in a variety of settings was beginning to be collected into systematic volumes of commentaries aimed at understanding the Qurʾan as a singularly authoritative text. Jaʿfar al-Sadiq lived during this transition and his teachings on the Qurʾan played a formative role in how many would come to understand revelation.

The Qurʾan has never been an easy text to intellectually comprehend, at least not in its entirety. From the time of the Prophet Muhammad on through the first generations of Muslims, we have many records of people asking and debating the meaning of certain passages. In addition to debates over the semantic range of words or phrases, some portions of the text were assumed to be universally applicable while others only for a specific community or period of time. And as famously stated in the Qurʾan itself, in the seventh verse of the third *surah* (*Al al-ʿImran*), "Some verses are fixed in meaning – they are the standard verses – but other verses are ambiguous." Ironically perhaps, this verse itself has been the subject of immense debate throughout Islamic history and the implications of it are contentious. For Jaʿfar and others like him, this verse was an important way to demonstrate the dynamic complexity of the Qurʾan. It could not all be reduced to a plain, literal reading. But there was a danger here. Without proper guidance and education, those whose hearts are not pure, as the verse goes on to say, "pursue the ambiguous meanings in order to create discord in their pursuit of its meaning."

One of the most famous, and indeed beautiful, verses of the Qurʾan that most commentators agreed was ambiguous was the "light verse." It reads: "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His Light can be compared to a niche in which there is a lamp. The lamp is inside glass that is like a twinkling star. It burns on the oil of a blessed olive tree neither from the east nor from the west. It's as if the oil is on fire, and yet the fire does not touch it. Light upon light. God guides whom He wills to his light. And God provides people with comparisons, for God is all knowing." [Q 24:35]. In some of the Qurʾan's most poetically striking verses, such as this one, the ambiguities are manifold and the possibilities for interpretation are rich. For some Muslim scholars, the uncertainty of meaning in such passages was a danger that was better avoided entirely. Active discouragement from attempting to interpret this verse was not uncommon. But for Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, verses such as

this provided opportunities to explain his understanding of God and His actions with humanity.

Jaʿfar expounded on this verse on numerous occasions. In one account, Jaʿfar teased out the variations of the light of God, saying,

> The first of them is the light of protection of the heart; then there is light of fear; then light of hope; then light of recollection; then there is perception through the light of knowledge; then the light of shame; then there is the light of the sweetness of faith; then the light of surrender; then the light of goodness; then there is the light of blessing; then the light of grace; then the light of favours; then the light of generosity; then the light of compassion; then the light of the heart .... Each one of these lights has its people; it has its state and its locus. All (the lights) are from the lights of the Truth, which God, most high, has mentioned in His words: *God is the light of the heavens and the earth.* [*Gems,* 96-97]

Rather than attempting to explain the analogy used in the light verse, Jaʿfar was using the symbol of light as a place for reflecting on the existential encounter with the divine. But in a separate account, Jaʿfar took a different approach to the verse, quoting his father's teaching on the passage who framed this verse as a discussion of God's "guidance in the heart of a believer." In this reading, the niche is the inner life of the believer and the lamp is the light that God has placed in the believer's heart. The olive tree that is neither east nor west is like a believer who is unaffected by external conditions [*Anthology*, 354]. In this approach, Jaʿfar and his father used the image to explore the process of being guided by God through one's heart.

These two different ways of reading the light verse were not Jaʿfar's only teachings on the passage. For example, in a completely different account, Jaʿfar famously used the image of the lamp to think about the relationship between divine revelation, Muhammad, his family, and the prophets of history. In that model, the niche represents Fatima, the lamp stands for Hasan and Husayn, and the olive tree harkens back to Abraham [*Anthology*, 354; cf Kulayni, I: 174-175]. The reading is used to point people to the importance of following reliable guides throughout history. The key point here is that none of these readings are exclusive of one an-

other. For Jaʿfar, the Qurʾan has layers of meanings that were often hidden and required exploring.

Several commentators on the Qurʾan remembered Jaʿfar claiming that the entire Qurʾan had at least four levels of interpretation. Shahrastani, for instance, before diving into his own exegesis of the Qurʾan, reminds the reader that Jaʿfar taught that "God's Scripture is on the basis of four things: outward expression, allusion, subtleties and realities" [*Keys,* 128]. The same verses, therefore, can have multiple meanings even when the outward or literal meaning is fixed and definite. People's ability to access and accurately understand those meanings, however, depends on one's level of knowledge, the state of their heart, and the abilities of the person's intellect. For many people, the outer meaning of the Qurʾan was sufficient; others could understand the allusions. But few could go beyond that. The prophets had the greatest abilities in this area and only they could comprehend the deepest realities. Jaʿfar emphasized this idea again in explicating another Qurʾanic passage, saying, "The Truth has made the hearts of His friends meadows of His intimacy. He has planted in them trees of gnosis whose roots are firmly fixed in their inmost selves and whose branches stand in the divine Presence in the assembly (of witnessing). They reap the fruits of intimacy at every instant .... Everyone harvests from it a type in keeping with the scope of his effort and (according to) the manifestations of mystical knowledge and the effects of divine friendship that are unveiled for them" [*Gems,* 157].

There is reason to return again to the Qurʾan's *Surah Al al-ʿImran,* verse seven: "Some verses are fixed in meaning – they are the standard verses – but other verses are ambiguous. Those with impure hearts pursue the ambiguous meanings in order to create discord in their pursuit of its meaning. *No one knows the meaning except God. Those firmly established in knowledge say, 'We believe it. All of it is from our Lord'*" [italics mine]. The translation I've provided here follows the interpretation of the Arabic text most common among Muslims today. This English rendering suggests the inner, hidden meanings of the Qurʾan are only known to God. This is a fair translation, but it's not the only possible translation. Because of the ambiguities of Arabic syntax, this second portion of the verse could also faithfully be translated as, "No one knows the meaning *except God and those firmly established in knowledge*. They say, 'We believe it. All of it is from our Lord.'" [italics mine]. The latter trans-

lation reflects an understanding that Jaʿfar and others had of this verse and the Qurʾanic revelation. For him it was an essential part of God's plan that there always exist capable guides on earth who could understand and teach the mysteries of the Qurʾan.

Necessity of a Guide

At times, some of Jaʿfar's explications of the Qurʾanic text can seem to depart significantly from the more literal, surface meaning of the text. This would have made some scholars uneasy at the time when debates regarding the legitimacy of non-literal interpretations were hotly contested. What was to prevent a person from suggesting outlandish meanings in the Qurʾan if the meaning is not clearly related to the most literal and widely agreed upon understandings of the words? How could one prove or disprove allegorical, symbolic, or mystical readings of the Qurʾan? For more literalist interpreters, delving into spiritualized inner meanings of the Qurʾan made it too easy for people to falsely claim the Qurʾan meant whatever they wanted it to mean. The whole process was too dangerous and too uncertain.

These concerns were not foreign to Jaʿfar; in fact, he shared them. It was part of the reason for his hesitancy to embrace early philosophical trends that might try to impose human paradigms of thought onto the Qurʾan. And Jaʿfar was vocal in his criticism of people, even among his own followers, who took too many liberties in interpreting the Qurʾan to suit their imaginations. By teaching that there were hidden layers of meaning in the Qurʾan, Jaʿfar knew he was taking on a delicate task. The dangers of misinterpretation made the process of identifying and supporting qualified scholars all the more critical. His positions on legitimate religious authority must be read in this context.

From his earliest memories as a child, Jaʿfar had been raised within a family tradition of carefully seeking out the mysteries of God in the Qurʾan. It was unthinkable that the layers of spiritual truths should be abandoned because they were prone to misinterpretation. Quite the opposite, the inner meanings of the Qurʾan would best protect the community from misinterpretations. Even the plain, literal readings of the Qurʾan were disputed and prone to erroneous applications if not guided by the inner meanings as well. Both inner and outer meanings of the Qurʾan had to go hand in hand, either one was dangerous on their own.

Given the spiritual importance of embracing the inner dimensions of the Qurʾan, Jaʿfar was convinced that God would always make sure there was a reliable guide among the scholars whose intellect (*ʿaql*) – that knowledge of the heart – would recognize the Qurʾan's secrets. Throughout the generations, God would surely maintain a lineage of rightly guided teachers that could be safely followed. "Truly, God never leaves the earth without a person of surpreme knowledge. If it were not so, the truth would not be known from falsehood," Jaʿfar taught [Kulayni, I: 155]. Those guides would act as a continual proof (*hujja*) to God's word.

The *hujja,* in Jaʿfar's thought, was someone who can be relied upon as a guide. They were special people whose lives proved the truthfulness of God's word and acted as God's promises, or guarantees, of providing proper guidance. Jaʿfar said, "The earth has never been left without a person with Divine Authority [*hujja*] who can teach people about the lawful and unlawful matters, and call them to the path of Allah" [Kulayni, I: 155]. Jaʿfar's teachings come together around these ideas: spiritual commitment (*walaya*) to a religious authority, whose piety and intellect (*ʿaql*) serves as an authentication (*hujja*) for both the inner and outer meanings of the Qurʾan, was the means by which God guided the community. For later generations of Shiʿa scholars, the reliable spiritual guides were uniquely, perhaps even exclusively, a reference to the Imams. But not all of Jaʿfar's students understood it in this way. His ideas equally anticipated emerging Muslim conceptions of saints. The direct influence that Jaʿfar's teachings had on Muslim ideas of sainthood is difficult to prove, but equally difficult to deny.

Identifying the most reliable guide whose teachings on the inner meanings of the Qurʾan could be trusted was obviously of utmost importance. That was the reason for Jaʿfar's insistence on the process of designation (*nass*), a process that ironically complicated the selection of his own successor after his eldest son's death. But more broadly, Jaʿfar also seems to have felt convinced that the descendants of Fatima and ʿAli were uniquely equipped to assume these roles. Besides access to the intimate and rich variety of family stories connected to the Prophet that had been passed down, they were the only blood descendants of Muhammad. Jaʿfar saw the bodily connection with the Prophet to mirror the spiritual connection. To convey this idea, Jaʿfar drew upon the already popular notion of the "light of Muhammad." Like many other re-

vered figures of ancient and Biblical traditions, Muhammad was remembered by many of his followers as having possessed a light, a reflection of the divine light. Some of the earliest existant biographies of the Prophet, written by contemporaries of Jaʿfar such as Ibn Ishaq and Maʿmar b. Rashid, also drew upon this imagery. This can be most frequently seen in the stories of his birth when his mother experienced a vision of light. For many Muslims, the light of Muhammad testified to the uniqueness the Prophet: human, but exceptional in his spiritual and physical constitution. For Jaʿfar, and other ʿAlids, that special light was partly shared by his descendants, lending further reason to look to the *ahl al-bayt* for religious guidance.

An Anchor for the Sufis

Throughout recorded Islamic history there have been prominent strains of spirituality that focused on personal piety, love of the divine, devotion to the Prophet's family, and an emphasis the mystical depths of the Qurʾanic revelation. This general approach to Islam has been lived by diverse Muslims, from mainstream urban scholars to wild ascetics and wandering preachers. The most institutionally visible among these groups have been the religious orders collectively referred to as Sufism. Often mistaken as a sect of Islam, Sufis are Muslim men and women from a variety of Islamic schools and traditions that practice the spiritual disciplines, typically under the guidance and direction of a recognized teacher. The formalization of Sufism as a set of religious orders began well after the lifetime of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, but the basic ideas about God and spirituality that undergird Sufi perspectives, and upon which Sufis draw, are widely believed to go back to the Prophet's personal teachings. Jaʿfar appears to have played a pivotal role in spreading and popularizing those teachings.

There have been hundreds of Sufi orders through history, some of them quite small and short lived. Others have endured the test of time and established reputations as respected traditions of Islamic spirituality. They each differ from each other in many respects, so making any sweeping generalization about Sufis can be misleading. Some orders have embraced ecstatic religious experiences including dances and forms of trance. Others have preferred a more sober approach that avoids extreme states of ecstasy while retaining a strong emphasis on the core teachings of love, piety,

purification of the self. Interestingly, most of the major Sufi orders make claims to have their origins in the teachings of life and ʿAli. Because Sufis tend to invest authority and trust in the leaders of their orders, especially the founders of each, it has been important to trace the spiritual lineage of their teachers back to the Prophet. Such a lineage of discipleship lends legitimacy to the idea that the spiritual teachings are authentic to Muhammad's vision of Islam.

Establishing a spiritual lineage from teacher to student that would connect key Sufi masters of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries back to the Prophet Muhammad was no easy task. Many would trace their spiritual lineage through ʿAli in part because he was one of Muhammad's closest companions, a part of his inner family, but also because ʿAli was widely remembered for his spirituality, piety, and mystical teachings. In many of the separate spiritual lineages, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq served as a critical link, through his father and grandfather, going back to ʿAli. As a direct descendent of ʿAli with widely recognized claims to ʿAlid family leadership, Jaʿfar was an obvious person to claim in one's lineage. It's difficult to say how many of the ideas attributed to Jaʿfar are historically authentic, but there does seem to be an immense amount of consonance between what is widely attributed to him from among his followers and teachings later Sufi groups develop. Within a century after Jaʿfar's death, for example, various scholars and mystics were beginning to articulate theories related to the "friends of God," using the term *wali* (pl- *awliya*), or what we might call saints. This term was related to the concept of *walaya* and the idea of a spiritual guide that could be relied upon to discern the deep spiritual truths of Islam that are otherwise hidden or difficult to comprehend. These kinds of resonances of Jaʿfar's ideas within broader Islamic mysticism lend some credibility to the notion that Jaʿfar contributed to formative trends shaping Sufi ideas.

Among the most well-known Sufi orders, one notably rejects any reliance on ʿAli. The Naqshbandis, an adamantly Sunni Sufi order, were uncomfortable with the way Shiʿa ideas about ʿAli and his family had impacted Islamic mysticism more broadly. So rather than making a connection to ʿAli's authority, they insisted their spiritual insights are traced back to Abu Bakr, the first caliph. It's a claim that reflects later rivalries between Sunni and Shiʿa scholars who often pitted the merits of ʿAli and Abu Bakr against each other in efforts to demonstrate superiority of their own tradition.

But despite the heavy Sunni sensibilities of the Naqshbandi order, they still trace their teachings through Jaʿfar who, we must not forget, was not only a descendant of ʿAli but also a descendant of Abu Bakr. So even as Naqshbandis trace their lineage to Abu Bakr, Jaʿfar remains a critical teacher and a recognized master of spiritual insights.

The role of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq in formulating and spreading spiritual and mystical teachings that would impact the development of Sufism is noted in most studies of early Sufism. But the precise nature of his contribution, through which disciples, is difficult to state definitively. Among his most likely contributions was his approach and method to explicating the secrets of the Qurʾan. As commentaries on the Qurʾan began to be more common in the ninth and tenth centuries, mystical interpretations of the text began to take shape as well. Jaʿfar's impact on how people approached mystical and non-literal readings of the Qurʾan can be seen in numerous commentaries of subsequent generations. Shiʿa scholars obviously quote Jaʿfar extensively in their earliest commentaries, but many others did as well, perhaps most notably the eleventh century scholar Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami. Again, the authenticity of all the quotes al-Sulami and other commentators attribute to Jaʿfar can't easily be confirmed, but the cumulative picture we receive suggests Jaʿfar's understanding of layered of meanings in the Qurʾan was a concept that enabled a flourishing of insightful reflections on the divine message.

Another literature in which we see the impact of Jaʿfar's spiritual insights is in the hagiographical accounts of Muslim saints. And in those works, we can best appreciate the way in which his life served as a model for how to relate to political powers. The great Persian mystic and poet of the twelfth century, Farid al-Din ʿAttar, for example, began his famous book on the lives of saints, *Memorial of God's Friends* (*Tazkirat al-awliya*), with a long discussion of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. One of ʿAttar's first stories of Jaʿfar sees him being called before the caliph of the ʿAbbasid Empire in Baghdad, al-Mansur, who intended to do Jaʿfar harm. But when Jaʿfar came before the caliph, the caliph had a vision and changed his demeanor entirely, rushing to ask Jaʿfar's forgiveness [ʿAttar, 48]. In the presumably apocryphal account, the antagonistic relationship between saint and caliph is used to remind the readers of the superiority of the spiritual teachers over the worldly rulers. Sufis experienced

frequent run-ins with political leaders, especially in the ʿAbbasid period. Often walking a fine line between apolitical quietism and political critic, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq seems to have been a common model that Sufis drew upon. Jaʿfar's conscious effort to distance himself from political rule was well known, but so was his critique of those in the positions of power. In one comic account recorded by the tenth century teacher, Abu Nuʿaym, Jaʿfar is again brought before the Caliph al-Mansur when some flies landed on the caliph. Shooing away the flies, the caliph asks Jaʿfar, "Why did God create flies?" To which Jaʿfar responded, "To humble the mighty." [Abu Nuʿaym, III: 198]. Sufi writers like Abu Nuʿaym understood Jaʿfar's political quietism as a spiritual disposition intended to provide an alternative moral vision for the world that contrasted with the rulers of the day.

Across the centuries, the accolades that Jaʿfar has received from Sufis across the world would be too numerous to delve into here. But his memory has been invoked again and again as someone who held invaluable insights into the secrets of the Qurʾan, the nature of humankind, and how to live a beautiful life. Shahrastani summarized his description of Jaʿfar by saying, "he is a man with immense knowledge of religion and complete mastery of insight. He adamantly rejected worldly allurement and never succumbed to greed" [*Milal,* 133].

Inner Circle of Disciples

Delving into the hidden meanings of divine revelation was a politically dangerous task and often prone to misunderstanding or misrepresentation. It had to be done cautiously, with only the initiated. It necessitated a kind of secrecy. With his closest students, Jaʿfar offered private instruction in his home where he could discuss the nuances of his spiritual insights with those whom he trusted most.

Throughout history it has been quite common for religious leaders of various types, especially those of mystical traditions, to withhold certain knowledge from the public. By keeping some advanced teachings a secret for only a select group of students, a teacher could help prevent misunderstandings from being spread among the wider public. The practice of withholding certain teachings until a student has progressed through foundational curriculum, in many respects, is not unlike many modern educational models where a student must pass a given course before proceed-

ing to another. On the other hand, exclusive meetings can foster an elitist perspective and stoke even more suspicion and rumors about the imagined content of these secret lessons.

In the case of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, we do have some general ideas of what served as the core content of his secret teachings, though it would be impossible to uncover the full extent of it. For the most part, based on later teachings of his students and descendants, his primary focus seems to have been the esoteric interpretations of the Qurʾan. Like many others Muslim leaders of his generation, Jaʿfar shared a profound reverence for the text of the Qurʾan and considered it a uniquely powerful force by its very nature. Like a telescope aimed at the vortex of all cosmic realities, the Qurʾan offered infinite glimpses into the nature of God and it preserved inexhaustible truths about the nature of all reality. Jaʿfar saw every word, every syllable, and every letter of the Qurʾan full of lessons to be discovered and learned through the knowledge of the heart.

With his disciples, Jaʿfar would sometimes dissect a single word and use it to expound upon the revelation of God to humanity. In the following teaching attributed to Jaʿfar, he discusses a famous verse in the 112th chapter of the Qurʾan, *Surat al-Ikhlas,* where it says that God is "*al-samad.*" The term *al-samad* has a range of meanings and is often translated as eternal, self-sufficient, or absolute. In Arabic, the term is written with five letters: *alif-lām-ṣād-mīm-dāl.* Jaʿfar explores the meanings in this word using the letters individually but drawing upon their relationship to each other in this term both as a spoken and written word:

> *Al-Ṣamad* [contains] five letters: the *alif* indicates His indivisible oneness (*aḥadīyah*). The *lām* indicates His divinity (*ulūhīyah*). These two letters are assimilated, they do not manifest upon the tongue (in the uttered word) but do manifest in writing. This shows that His indivisible unity and His divinity are hidden, not known through the senses; and that He cannot be compared to people. The concealment (of these two letters) in the spoken word is an indication that the intelligence cannot perceive Him nor yet comprehend Him through knowledge. While the manifestation (of these two letters) in writing is an indication that He manifests in the hearts of the sages and that He appears to the eyes of the lovers in the Abode of Peace.

> The *ṣād* is an indication that He is truthful in what He promises: His act is sincerity (*ṣidq*), His speech is sincerity (*ṣidq*), and He summons His slaves to sincerity (*ṣidq*). The *mīm* is an indication of His sovereignty (*mulk*) for He is the Sovereign King (*malik*) in reality. The *dāl* is the mark of His permanence (*dawām*) in His eternal future and His eternal past – although there is neither past-eternity nor future-eternity for they are but terms which are used among His slaves according to the [perspective of] temporal variation. [*Gems,* 192-193]

There are many examples of teachings similar to this one attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq in which he explores the meaning of individual letters, sounds, and silences within the spoken and written revelation of the Qurʾan. One can appreciate why Jaʿfar may have reserved lessons like this for his more advanced students. Often the content of his ruminations on the Qurʾanic text do not yield simple instructions that can applied to your life. Rather, Jaʿfar is trying to take those who already have a foundational knowledge of the Qurʾan on a contemplative and meditative exploration of divine realities.

Jaʿfar was not the only scholar of his generation to search for hidden meanings within the Qurʾan, but he was one of the most celebrated. In subsequent generations more elaborate systems of numerological codes were developed by different scholars to demonstrate even more layers of meanings. As in the Hebrew tradition, Arabic letters were assigned numeric values and thus the entire Qurʾan could be translated into a massive mathematical grid that could then be mined for patterns across the text to reveal secret messages. This scholarly and mystical "science of letters" (*ʿilm al-huruf*) has been put to a variety of purposes for centuries including defending the divine origin of the Qurʾan and prognosticating future events.

It's unclear just how much of the later developments of numerology and prognostication based on Arabic letters can be accurately traced by to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. It is mostly a later phenomenon. But Jaʿfar's interest in the meaning of individual letters and sounds in the Qurʾan, coupled with his commitment to the notion that there were layers of hidden meanings in the sacred text, helped lay the foundation for those later developments.

Reigning in the Exaggerations

Jaʿfar had a loyal group of followers and a committed core of disciples. For them, Jaʿfar was their spiritual guide, the grounding for their faith, and the absolute authority on all matters. There is no doubt that Jaʿfar was deeply revered and respected. His journeys with them into the heart of the Qurʾan and its hidden meanings were transformative to their lives and outlooks on the world. Jaʿfar knew that some of his teachings were best kept to his inner group of disciples. But once a message is put forth, it's difficult to control how people understand it and interpret its implication. On several occasions Jaʿfar found himself frustrated when some of his students attributed to Jaʿfar ideas and teachings that he did not espouse.

A well-known, though extreme, example of a rogue student comes from the late part of Jaʿfar's life. Much to the surprise of many around Jaʿfar, and no doubt Jaʿfar himself, one of his students known as Abu Khattab al-Asadi began claiming that Jaʿfar al-Sadiq was actually the incarnation of God on earth. And furthermore, taught Abu al-Khattab, Jaʿfar had appointed Abu al-Khattab as his prophet and spokesperson. It was a claim for which Jaʿfar was quick to rebuke Abu al-Khattab. Jaʿfar was unambiguous in his rejection of Abu al-Khattab's erroneous teachings, but Jaʿfar also retained the hope of restoring Abu al-Kattab by simply correcting him rather than taking more harsh measures that would have put Abu al-Khattab's life in danger. This conciliatory approach, however, may have made the situation worse.

It was a curious twist of fate for Jaʿfar that within such an adamantly monotheistic intellectual and religious tradition as early Islam that such a serious misunderstanding could occur between him and a close disciple. It could be, as many defenders of Jaʿfar's legacy would have it, that Abu al-Khattab had sinister ulterior motives and that this was no innocent mistake. On the other hand, Jaʿfar was not afraid to employ symbolic and metaphorical language in his teachings which inevitably widens the potential for diverging interpretations. And furthermore, Jaʿfar used some of this language, such as the idea of the "light of Muhammad," to explain the exceptional connection between the family of Muhammad and the cosmic event of the divine revelation of the Qurʾan. It's not hard to imagine that a student like Abu al-Khattab could

have come to his conclusions through what he saw as the implications of Jaʿfar's teachings.

Regardless of Abu al-Khattab's original motives, his conviction that Jaʿfar was divine, and Abu al-Khattab's reluctance to abandon this notion, would have long lasting implications for Muslim intellectual traditions. Abu al-Khattab had previously been appointed as a teacher in Kufa by Jaʿfar so Abu al-Khattab had an audience and a following that accepted his new claims about Jaʿfar's divinity. Because Jaʿfar had been the one to appoint Abu al-Khattab in Kufa, Jaʿfar's rebuke of Abu al-Khattab confused many of Jaʿfar's followers. Eventually Jaʿfar had to take even more drastic measures. After Abu al-Khattab refused to cease his erroneous and dangerous teachings, Jaʿfar fully denounced him. Around that same time, ʿAbbasid forces also grew concerned about this movement. In the year 755 or 756, a conflict with the ʿAbbasids resulted in the death of most of Abu al-Khattab's followers and his public execution.

Abu al-Khattab's teachings, however, had spread and influenced a number of other groups, especially other followers of Jaʿfar and even Jaʿfar's sons. It is believed that Abu al-Khattab made claims about the transmigration of souls from one generation to the next and that he taught a kind of antinomianism which rejected the necessity of following Islamic legal rulings. It's difficult to know the full extent of Abu al-Khattab's actual teachings, but there's no doubt that many people were impacted by him. Numerous accounts suggest Jaʿfar's oldest son, Ismaʿil, had shown some interest in Abu al-Khattab's ideas at some point and there is evidence that some later Ismaʿili ideas may have had some of their inspiration in Abu al-Khattab's charismatic circle.

Furthermore, Abu al-Khattab wasn't the only follower of Jaʿfar who occasionally took their understandings of Jaʿfar's ideas beyond what Jaʿfar intended. Such overzealous followers of the ʿAlid family were often referred to as exaggerators (*ghulat*) by their detractors. A series of well-known *ghulat* movements had emerged and often led revolts against Umayyad and ʿAbbasid forces in the seventh and eighth centuries. There was no common agreement about whose teachings were *ghulat* and who were not. It was mostly a denigrating term used much like the term "cult" is today commonly used for small religious movements that are considered heretical or suspicious by majority religious groups. But extreme devotion to the leaders of the ʿAlid families, sometimes even the

explicit worship of these imams, was a common characteristic of the so-called *ghulat.*

As for the followers of Abu al-Khattab's teachings, the movement survived despite the violent execution of their leaders in Kufa by the ʿAbbasids. Speculation and rumors circulated among the survivors that perhaps Jaʿfar had merely pretended to condemn Abu al-Khattab's teachings as a way to remain discreet and safe. This line of reasoning often served as a way for *ghulat* groups to hold onto their views despite the fact that Jaʿfar and other ʿAlid leaders often denounced them.

Jaʿfar al-Sadiq was openly and explicitly opposed to Abu al-Khattab's teachings and those of other *ghulat* groups. But Jaʿfar also consistently preferred guiding and teaching over condemning. He was willing to keep *ghulat*-inclined students among his own followers, even former pupils of Abu al-Khattab, in hopes of spiritual restoration and correction rather than expulsion. This optimistic and conciliatory approach is admirable but it also came at a cost. In a context in which the followers of the ʿAlid leaders continued to experience varying levels of persecution at the hands of the ʿAbbasids, Jaʿfar and his descendants were forced to increasingly rely on secret meetings with their students. And thus it is not surprising that speculative interpretations and extreme claims continued to accompany some of Jaʿfar's followers for generations.

By the ninth and tenth centuries, when Shiʿism was beginning to be more formalized as a school of thought, some zealous ʿAlid devotees went their own direction and openly reclaimed the *ghulat* legacy. By transforming the term into a badge of honor and devotion rather than a term of scorn, various groups began emerging that claimed to have the secret teachings of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. This tension would be left for centuries of debate among the mainstream Shiʿa communities and more marginalized *ghulat*-inspired traditions. Although the majority of Shiʿa leaders have adamantly denounced these later *ghulat* groups, the latter have continued to experience various moments of interest to the present day.

Conclusion

The accolades that have been bestowed upon Jaʿfar al-Sadiq by later generations of Muslim biographers are immense. His humility, generosity, leadership, service to others, devotion to God, and love for the Prophet and his family are all undisputed. As a prominent

member of the ʿAlid family, he was not only a much sought teacher in Medina who preserved and passed on important memories of the Prophet and his family. But he also helped develop and spread foundational concepts of Islamic spirituality. Jaʿfar's conviction that the Qurʾan held layers of meanings and insights into God and God's creation helped inspire centuries of Muslim devotion and inquiry. For Jaʿfar, the surface meaning of the Qur'an was only the beginning, and important starting point which invited the servant of God to learn more.

Later generations of Muslim scholars would develop a full taxonomy of technical terms to differentiate the various types of interpretations of the Qurʾan. But for Jaʿfar, the key was to follow a reliable guide in this process, someone whose piety and knowledge were unsurpassed. Only such a mentor could faithfully and correctly plumb the depths of spiritual knowledge offered by the Qurʾan. These mentor-student relationships were intimate and illuminating. The danger of misunderstandings, however, necessitated a more careful and guarded approach to these lessons that were not open to the general public. His teaching model and approach to knowledge has been emulated by Muslim teachers for generations and Jaʿfar continues to be highly regarded among Muslim mystical orders today.

But even Jaʿfar's precautions could not prevent misunderstandings and disagreements among his students. The private nature of many of his lessons coupled with the transformative impact they had on many of his students facilitated fanciful and imaginative rumors and speculation. At times, even his own students claimed Jaʿfar taught them secrets that Jaʿfar adamantly denounced. Political repression only exacerbated the situation and contributed to the complicated legacy that follows Jaʿfar and his ideas. Many were inspired by Jaʿfar, some were suspicious, but it was later generations of Shiʿa Muslims who would go on to make the more adamant claims about Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, at topic to which we turn in the next chapter.

Selected Quotes Attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq

The collection of teachings attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq in *Lantern of the Path* begins with this exhortation:

The roots of conduct have four aspect: conduct with Al-

> lah (SWT), conduct with the self, conduct with creation (i.e. people), and conduct with this world. Each of these aspects is based upon seven principles, just as there are seven principles of conduce with Allah (SWT): giving Him His due, keeping His limits, being thankful for His gift, being content with His decree, being patient with His trials, glorifying His sanctity, and yearning for Him.
>
> The seven principles of conduct with the self are fear, striving, forgiveness, harm, spiritual discipline, seeking truthfulness and sincerity, withdrawing the self from what it loves, and binding it in poverty (*faqr*).
>
> The seven principles of conduct with creation are forbearance, forgiveness, humility, generosity, compassion, good counsel, justice and fairness.
>
> The seven principles of conduct with this world are being content with what is at hand, preferring what is available to what is not, abandoning the quest for the elusive, hating overabundance, choosing abstinence (*zuhd*), knowing the evils of this world and abandoning any desire for it, and negating its dominance.
>
> When all these qualities are found in one person, he is then on of Allah's (SWT) elite, one of His close bondman and friends (*awliya'*). [*Lantern*, 3]

These types of numbered lists of virtues, rituals, or warnings were a common didactic tool of late antiquity. They helped the audience remember and retain the ideas. In addition to outlining principles, as above, Jaʿfar used this method to explain levels of meaning in the Qurʿan:

> The book of God has four things: literal expression (*ʿibarah*), allusion (*isharah*), subtleties (*lata'if*) and the deepest realities (*haqa'iq*). The literal expression is for the commonalty (*ʿawamm*), the allusion is for the elite (*khawass*), the subtleties are for the friends [of God] (*awliya'*), and the deepest realities are for the prophets (*anbiya'*). [*Gems*, 1]

And to outline motivations for worshipping God:

> Verily mankind worship Allah in three different ways. One group among them worships Him out of desire for His Paradise and in the hope of His reward-and this is the

> worship of servants. Another group worships Him for fear of His Fire-and this is the worship of slaves. Yet another group worships Him out of love for Him -and this is the worship of the noble ones; these, indeed, are the trusted ones. [*Creed*, 72]

And to explain types of spiritual knowledge (gnosis):

> From gnosis there gush forth twelve springs. All people drink from one of those springs, in a [given] rank, at a [given] station, according to their scope.
>
> The first of these springs is that of professing God's unity. The second is the spring of slavehood and joy in it. The third is the spring of faithfulness. The fourth is the spring of sincerity. The fifth is the spring of humility. The sixth is the spring of contentment and entrustment [of all things to God]. The seventh is the spring of the Peace (of God's Presence) and dignity. The eighth is the spring of liberality and confidence in God. The ninth is the spring of certainty. The tenth is the spring of the intellect. The eleventh is the spring of love. The twelfth is the spring of intimacy and solicitude [with God]; this is the very spring of gnosis itself and from it gush forth these [other] springs. Whoever drinks from one of these springs finds it sweetness and strives hopefully for the spring which is higher than it – from spring to spring until he attains the origin. When he reaches the origin he realizes the Truth. [*Gems*, 41]

The spiritual knowledge, or knowledge of the heart, was an important concept for Jaʿfar, as discussed in the chapter. Many of his comments on the topic stem from his reflections on the Qur'an. And taught that recitation of the Qur'an was a critical method purifying the heart:

> When he frees himself of all attachments, then his heart is devoted to recitation, and nothing impedes him from obtaining the blessing of light of the Qur'an and its benefits. When he finds and empty place and withdraws from people, having acquired the two qualities of humility of heart and tranquility of body, then his soul and his innermost being will feel communion with Allah (SWT), and he will discover the sweetness of how Allah (SWT) speaks to

> His right-acting bondsmen, how He shows His gentleness, to them and singles them out for all the varieties of His marks of honor and wondrous signs. If he drinks a cup of this drink, he will never prefer any other state to this nor any other moment to this. He will prefer this to every act of obedience and devotion, since it contains intimate conversation with the Lord, without any intermediary. [*Lantern*, 15]

As can be seen in many of the quotes attributed to Jaʿfar, he frequently made connections between the bodily and the spiritual, always seeing one as a metaphor for the other. In one of his ritual discourses on using the *siwak* (a type of stick used to clean one's teeth), he connects the practice back to the heart:

> As you remove the stains caused by food and drink from your teeth with the siwak, so remove the impurity of your wrong actions by humble entreaty, humility, night prayers, and asking for forgiveness before dawn. Purify your outer being from impurities, and your inner being from the turbidity of acts of opposition and committing anything prohibited, all the while acting sincerely for Allah (SWT). The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) made its use an example for people for alertness and attention, in that the siwak is a clean, soft plant and the twig of a blessed tree. The teeth are what Allah (SWT) created in the mouth as a tool for eating, an implement for chewing, a reason for enjoying food and for keeping their intestines in order. ... Similarly Allah (SWT) created the heart pure and clean, and made its food remembrance, reflection, awe and respect. When the pure heart turns grey by being fed on heedlessness and vexation, it is polished by the burnish of repentance and cleaned by the water of regret, so that it reverts to its primal state and its basic essence .... In recommending the use of the siwak the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) was advocating that it be used on the teeth themselves; but he also implied the meaning and example we have referred to above, that for anyone who empties his faculty of reflection for the purpose of drawing inward lessons from the outward examples, with respect to both the principle and roots of faith, Allah

> (SWT) will open the springs of wisdom, and will give him still more of His overflowing favor, for Allah (SWT) does not neglect the reward of those who act well. [*Lantern*, 70]

The constant focus for Jaʿfar was to point people toward the inner meanings of the Qur'an and the spiritual significance of rituals and obligations. Later Muslim mystics would even further elaborate on these themes of mindfulness and complete devotion to God. Hujwiri records Jaʿfar saying that "whoever knows God turns his back on all else" [Hujwiri, 79]. And in Jaʿfar's commentary on what it mean to be "godly," he described it as "those who listen with the hearing of the heart and who see with the eyes of the unseen [i.e., with spiritual vision]" and "that you see nothing in your heart other than Him" [*Gems*, 23-24].

Chapter IV: An Imam for the Shiʿa

> As long as the world lasts, there will be in it a guide (*hujja*) who will give people knowledge of what is lawful and forbidden, and will call people to the path of God.
>
> Ja-far al-Sadiq [Kulayni, I:178]

Jaʿfar had two sons and a daughter with his first wife, Fatima. These three children were very dear to him. The two sons, Ismaʿil and ʿAbdullah, were groomed to potentially succeed him. His daughter, known as Umm Farwa, shared the name of Jaʿfar's mother. In addition to the prominence of his father's reputation as a leader of the family, Jaʿfar's mother was considered to have embodied a trace of royalty herself. Her own grandmother was said to have been a Persian princess. A century earlier, after the Persian Sassanid Empire fell, a number of the daughters of royal families married into the prominent Arab families. Such was the case for Umm Farwa's grandmother. And as the daughter of a famous jurist scholar in Medina, al-Qasim, Umm Farwa was also highly educated. She is said to have transmitted numerous hadith and was consulted as an authority on religious matters. Jaʿfar's naming of his first daughter after her suggests a level of admiration and respect for his mother.

Despite a family tradition in which the men's legacies loomed large, the men of this family were no strangers to strong and formidable women. After the tragedy of Karbala, when many of the men had been killed in battle, it was the women who primarily carried on the main family traditions. Zayn al-ʿAbidin and Muhammad al-Baqir were surrounded by women of considerable reputation. This must have made an impact on Jaʿfar as a child. One of the matriarchs of the family in Medina, Fatima bint Husayn, knew Jaʿfar throughout his childhood and on into adulthood. Fatima was said to have been the keeper of some of the most important family heirlooms and belongings of the Prophet, until she turned them

over to Zayn al-ʿAbidin. As a young child, before the age of ten, when Jaʿfar spent much of his time at his grandfather's house, the children most like siblings to him were his aunts. Jaʿfar's father was the oldest of a large family, with at least fourteen siblings. As a firstborn son himself, Jaʿfar was closer in age to his aunts, Fatima, ʿAliyya, and Umm Kulthum, who would have been his most likely childhood playmates. It is possible that the influence of these women on Jaʿfar's life may account for the unique number of traditions which record Jaʿfar praising and speaking highly of women in his life [Dakake, 228-229].

After Jaʿfar's first wife died, he went on to have seven other children with at least four other women, a pattern common among men of his age and stature. Each of the other mothers of his children was either a concubine or former concubine whom he may have manumitted and married. His third son, for example, Musa, was the son of Hamida, a Berber slave from North Africa. After the death of Jaʿfar's first two sons, many of his followers went on to accept Musa as their guide. This prompted occasional speculation into Hamida's background and legends of how she came into the family flourished.

Most medieval biographers of early Muslim leaders saw no reason to include details about men's personal lives. Rarely are we provided information about the women of their lives or their relationships. It simply wasn't considered pertinent information to the legacies or intellectual contributions of scholars or political leaders. There are exceptions to that general tendency, however. Notably, for example, among Shiʿa groups of medieval and modern periods, there was often significant interest in the personal lives of the early imams like Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. As Shiʿism developed in the ninth to twelfth centuries, the exemplary lives of the imams took on an increasingly central role in the religious and devotional lives of many Shiʿa Muslims. It wasn't merely the teachings of these men in their formal capacities that were worth remembering, but their full lives at every level were sources of knowledge and inspiration. Similar to the types of devotion to the Prophet Muhammad that has been common throughout most Muslim traditions, many Shiʿa groups cultivated a devotion to the key members of the *ahl al-bayt.*

This chapter turns our attention away from the historical life of Jaʿfar and looks at the communities for whom his life has been most central for their religious ideas. Although we have already seen

ways in which Jaʿfar made important contributions to the broad development of Islamic thought, particularly in regard to Islamic legal thought and mysticism, his legacy has a uniquely elevated role among various Shiʿa groups. With the notable exception of Zaydi Shiʿa Muslims, the other main Shiʿa groups were immensely shaped by Jaʿfar, arguably more than anyone else. But the memory of Jaʿfar, even among these Shiʿa groups, is not always the same.

"Shiʿism" in the Eighth Century

It is challenging to talk about Shiʿism with historical accuracy during and immediately after the lifetime of Jaʿfar. The problem is that what came to be known as Shiʿism in later centuries, and what we tend to mean when the term is used today, simply did not exist during Jaʿfar's lifetime. There was no dichotomy between Sunni and Shiʿa forms of Islam in the ways that they would often be conceptualized in later Islamic centuries. Furthermore, Shiʿism has never been a single homogenous religious category. There are a variety of quite distinct schools of thought today that fall under the common rubric of "Shiʿism" and the connections between those groups are often rather tenuous if anything more than genealogical.

And yet, at the same time, the Arabic term *shiʿa* was in use from the first decades after the Prophet Muhammad's death. And since that time on through the life of Jaʿfar, there were groups connected to Jaʿfar that laid claim to being from the *shiʿat ʿAli* (the party of ʿAli). Furthermore, most later Shiʿa communities trace their own histories through the leaders of those groups. So it does not make any sense to ignore the fact that a kind of shiʿism existed in the eighth century. But we must be cautious about anachronistically projecting later forms of Shiʿism onto Jaʿfar's context.

During most of Jaʿfar's life, prior to the ʿAbbasid revolution in 750, *shiʿat ʿAli* was a term for those who identified with the leadership and claims of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib. The actual contemporaries of ʿAli who historically supported him were mostly deceased by Jaʿfar's time. But ʿAli's legacy continued to be championed by people in his name, a name which had become a symbol for justice movements and anti-tyranny revolutionaries. The shiʿa stood most explicitly in opposition to those who fought against ʿAli in the name of ʿUthman, the third caliph. The Umayyad leaders had defended the rights of ʿUthman and firmly rejected any claim that

ʿAli was a rightful caliph. This resulted in an early division which left many feeling the need to pick sides between the pro-establishment ʿUthmani/Umayyads and the "pro-justice" shiʿa, though some argued for a kind of middle position that did not take sides. Some of the shiʿa were simply anti-government agitators for a variety of causes, often latching onto the shiʿa movement as way to justify their rebellion. But for most of the shiʿa, there was a compelling link between the causes of ʿAli and the injustices suffered by many at the hands of the Umayyads. The brutal government executions of people like ʿAli's son, Husayn, and great-grandson, Zayd, mobilized widespread popular support for shiʿa movements. Many prominent leaders of the late-seventh and early-eighth century were sympathetic to the shiʿa cause if not directly supportive of it.

Many of those who may be said to have shown shiʿa sympathies, however, would not be considered Shiʿa by later parameters of the term. There was no coherent doctrinal unity among them, but rather they espoused a number of different views on issues along with other members of the broader Muslim community. They did not all exclusively follow the religious guidance of a particular person from the ʿAlids, nor was there complete agreement that political leadership should be reserved for the ʿAlid family. Rather, the movement was held together as much by their disdain for the Umayyads (and later, the ʿAbbasids) as anything else. Even calling it a movement might suggest more coherence to the perspective than is warranted. It was a loose coalition destined to develop in different directions. But despite its diffuse origins, there was widespread agreement that ʿAli had been wronged, that his descendants had been unjustly targeted, and that Umayyad policies were out of sync with the Prophet Muhammad's teachings.

Highlighting the political nature of the early shiʿa movement does not mean that it lacked correlating religious dynamics. Among those with some degree of shiʿa loyalty/sympathy, the religious teachings of ʿAli and prominent members of his family tended to be held in particularly high regard. There were emerging trends of unique ritual performances in communities with large populations of shiʿa, especially Medina and Kufa. Esoteric interpretations of the Qurʾan tended to be more common and apocalyptic narratives flourished in specific ways. Perhaps the most powerful and popularly held *shiʿa* sentiment was the hope of an ʿAlid avenger, or

a *mahdi,* who would restore justice to the community and establish an Islamic governance as a fulfillment of the Prophet's mission. This eschatological expectation was inextricably both political and religious, and precisely what helped the ʿAbbasid campaign achieve its success.

The general absence of religious or doctrinal unity helps us appreciate the unparalleled impact of Jaʿfar's teachings had on the development of Shiʿism. By building upon many of his father's ideas, Jaʿfar refined and expanded a unique body of religious teachings, discussed in the previous chapters. Although many statements and ideas are attributed to Jaʿfar that clearly reflect later Shiʿa developments, many of the most formative teachings seem to have been articulated by Jaʿfar and his followers. Like most others among the shiʿa of his day, Jaʿfar likely also held out hope that there would eventually be a *mahdi* from their family who would set right the Islamic political and legal institutions and restore justice to the world. But unlike many other shiʿa leaders, Jaʿfar did not see that as his responsibility. Following the precedent set by his father and grandfather, Jaʿfar kept his distance from the domain of politics and focused his attentions on maintaining and elaborating upon the religious teachings of his family. Jaʿfar trusted that God would raise up the *mahdi* when the time was right. But his own primary concern was to provide religious guidance that would keep his family and their followers on the straight path until that day. In this regard, he was like many of his contemporaries who contributed in a broader trend among Muslim intellects at the time. By asserting their own authority on religious matters of interpretation, they were effectively (if not always officially) divesting religious authority form the political powers and rooting Islamic thought in a competitive field of scholarship.

Jaʿfar's success as a scholar and teacher infused parts of the shiʿa movement with more substantive religious content which helped established his followers as more than just anti-establishment agitators. But here again, we cannot treat Jaʿfar's disciples as simplistically synonymous with early Shiʿism. There were other shiʿa leaders, including some prominent ʿAlids, who rejected Jaʿfar's quietist approach to politics and who disapproved of Jaʿfar's teachings. And on the flipside, there were some among Jaʿfar's followers who did not necessarily align themselves with the shiʿa position politically, but found Jaʿfar to be a worthy teacher and source of

religious knowledge. That being said, Jaʿfar was a revered leader of the ʿAlid families and often looked upon by the shiʿa as the most legitimate religious authority for the family. The career of Jaʿfar fused much of the popular ʿAlid loyalism of the shiʿa with his understanding of the authentic interpretation of the divine revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad.

In the final years of Jaʿfar's life, however, much of what he had built was beginning to fracture. The widespread ʿAlid loyalty that helped bring down the Umayyads in 750 was suddenly under even greater threat in the first decades of the ʿAbbasid reign. Once news spread that the descendants of ʿAbbas, the Prophet's uncle, were claiming leadership as representatives of the *ahl al-bayt*, some of the ʿAlid leaders cried foul and a new surge of uprisings appeared. Although Jaʿfar again tried to keep his distance from the wave of civil strife, many of the shiʿa threw their support behind various revolutionaries. In an effort to secure their claim to the caliphate, the ʿAbbasids cracked down hard on the ʿAlids. One of the most famous rebellions against the ʿAbbasids came in 762 and achieved some initial success in the area around Mecca and Medina. Led by Muhammad Nafs al-Zakiyya, who was one of Jaʿfar's distant cousins and another descendant of ʿAli, the movement was soon squashed and the leader killed. Anyone professing loyalty to ʿAlid leaders was under grave threat by the state powers. It was likely in this context of heightened tension with the governing officials that Jaʿfar encouraged his followers to practice prudent dissimulation (*taqiyya*), a concealment of one's beliefs in order to survive the government crackdown on the ʿAlid loyalists. While the tactic shielded some followers from ʿAbbasid persecution, it also contributed to a general confusion that would have profound ramifications for the next generation of the *shiʿat ʿAli.*

The *Taqiyya* Debate

If the situation wasn't already confusing enough, there's an additional twist that adds one more layer of complications to sorting out the historical Jaʿfar: the use of *taqiyya*. Often translated as "dissimulation," the idea of *taqiyya* is, at its most basic level, the permission to conceal one's true beliefs when admission of those beliefs would put oneself in danger. It's a kind of religious prudence, an allowance to keep one's personal beliefs secret in times of persecution. While some Sunni scholars have historically per-

mitted the use of *taqiyya* in certain circumstances, the term is most closely associated with Shiʿism. In the decades of Umayyad and ʿAbbasid persecution of shiʿa ʿAlid loyalists, Jaʿfar and his father, Muhammad al-Baqir, seem to have encouraged their followers to take this precautionary measure of secrecy to protect them against unjust persecution.

The precise conditions under which Jaʿfar advised *taqiyya*, and how extensively he intended it to be used, are difficult to determine. But the concept became an important doctrinal position for later Shiʿa leaders who often relied upon taqiyya to protect themselves from discrimination and persecution. Some classical Shiʿa traditions hold up *taqiyya* as a kind of badge of true Shiʿism that could be applied with pride. Anti-Shiʿa polemicists, however, typically jumped on this issue and claimed it meant Shiʿa Muslims were duplicitous and untrustworthy.

The topic of *taqiyya* became a controversy in itself, but it especially complicates our reading of Jaʿfar's life when Shiʿa scholars claim that Jaʿfar himself relied upon the use of *taqiyya*. It's not hard to imagine some possible motivations for making this bold claim. When later anti-Shiʿa scholars brought forth traditions attributed to Jaʿfar that contradicted classical Shiʿa teachings, a common Shiʿa response was to claim that Jaʿfar was practicing *taqiyya*. In this way, accounts that portrayed Jaʿfar as prefering Abu Bakr over ʿAli didn't need to be refuted as inauthentic or spurious, opponents could just claim that Jaʿfar was using *taqiyya* when he made such statements. This opened up possibilities for Shiʿa scholars to reconcile any number of conflicting accounts regarding Jaʿfar's teachings. Anything transmitted that went counter to later Shiʿa traditions could be assumed to have been *taqiyya*.

Invoking *taqiyya* as a way to explain the complicated legacy of Jaʿfar is a double-edged sword for the Shiʿa. It removes any real foundation upon which we can build a consistent understanding of Jaʿfar and reduces him to the preferences of any given school of thought. Twelver Shiʿa Muslims, for example, have traditionally put great emphasis on Jaʿfar's explicit condemnation of his more radical followers, like Abu Khattab, who claimed that Jaʿfar was divine. When Shiʿa Muslims have been accused of worshipping their leaders, the imams, Shiʿa scholars have consistently pointed to examples such as this to demonstrate their doctrinal rejection of such a notion. But the followers of Abu Khattab, the Khattabiya,

countered with the claim that Jaʿfar was only using *taqiyya* and that his condemnations of those beliefs were not his real beliefs. If Jaʿfar did broadly and regularly rely upon *taqiyya*, even giving public lectures that did not reflect his true beliefs, then sorting any semblance of the historical Jaʿfar becomes nearly impossible.

Shiʿa doctrines of *taqiyya* introduced an added layer of complications, and it is another reason why many Sunni scholars increasingly avoided references to Jaʿfar altogether. A cloud of uncertainty and suspicion of deception lingered among Sunni scholars and made Jaʿfar's legacy too fraught to rely upon. And while there may be some good reasons to question the applicability of *taqiyya*, Sunni and Shiʿa contentions ensured that *taqiyya* would remain part of the conversation and shape debates into the modern period.

The Imamate

In an attempt to provide clear leadership for those who relied on the *ahl al-bayt* for guidance, Jaʿfar put strong emphasis on the rightful succession of the family's leadership. Through his insistence upon a succession exclusively through *nass* (explicit designation), he encouraged his followers to avoid being caught up in the revolts of other ʿAlids. Jaʿfar claimed he had been designated by his father who had been designated by his own father, on back to the Prophet's designation of ʿAli. It was a comforting and practical logic. Furthermore, as noted in the previous chapters, Jaʿfar argued that God would not let the leader of this family, as a successor to the Prophet's legacy, fall into error in guiding the people. Jaʿfar was convinced that God had ordained his family for a special role to ensure that the Prophet's teachings were correctly understood and that reliable guidance was always available.

This concept of a recognized succession of reliable leaders who can be trusted to provide religious guidance in a post-prophetic era is known in Shiʿism as the imamate (*imamiyya*). While the term "imam" more literally means someone who leads, and can refer variously to prayer leaders or the leader of the Muslim community (synonymous with caliph in many early contexts), it has a distinct usage in the history of Shiʿism. The imam, or the *hujja* (as Jaʿfar also referred to the role), was unique among religious leaders. Although not a prophet, the imams came to be seen as extensions of the prophet, both physically (as descendants) and spiritually (in religious authority). They did not bring new revelation from God,

but they did provide new insights into divine revelations that extended God's message in a continually unfolding and dynamic way.

In the eighth century, when many theological issues, political debates, and philosophical controversies were swirling, Jaʿfar urged his followers to cling to the guidance of the family's imam. They could rest assured that God would not lead them astray. Some of Jaʿfar's followers claimed that he taught that the imams were completely protected from error, a doctrine known as *ʿismat*, or infallibility. Most later Shiʿa groups would ascribe this doctrine to Jaʿfar and develop the ideas more fully, though not without some controversy and debate. Regardless of whether Jaʿfar taught this exact doctrine or not, or how he might have understood it, it is clear that he encouraged his followers to trust the imam through whom they would not be misled.

Despite Jaʿfar's best efforts to make religious authority and succession within the family more clear for his followers, his death left his disciples in confusion and disarray. As described in the first chapter, Jaʿfar had designated his eldest son, Ismaʿil, to be the next imam. A number of Jaʿfar's followers had begun to consider Ismaʿil their imam. But when Jaʿfar was in his sixties, just a few years before his own death, Ismaʿil unexpectedly passed away. What happened after that is nearly impossible to determine, as each group has their own version of the story. The two largest groups of Shiʿa Muslims today, the Twelvers and Ismaʿilis, mark their parting of paths at the death of Jaʿfar. How the memory of Jaʿfar fits into their respective traditions is summarized below. But it is clear that Ismaiʿil's death was a tragic crisis that was a challenge for Jaʿfar's followers to understand. Why did Jaʿfar appoint Ismaʿil? If Jaʿfar was protected by God from making errors in guiding the people, then how could this have happened? Did Jaʿfar make a mistake? Did God change his will? Was the appointment of Ismaʿil a purposeful diversion to protect the real appointed heir? Or was Ismaʿil the imam for a time? And if so, whom did he appoint? This confusion couldn't have come at a worse time. The ʿAlids were already under intense ʿAbbasid scrutiny and many of their followers were in hiding or keeping their identity secret. Thus the spread of information was obfuscated and difficult to verify. It was a perfect breeding ground for rumors and speculation which developed quickly into divergent narratives and interpretations.

Ironically, the significant differences that developed between

the various segments of Jaʿfar's students actually help clarify some important information about his ideas. Jaʿfar's teachings were emphasized by a variety of interpretive communities toward different purposes, especially by later Ismaʿili and Twelver Shiʿa traditions, but also some of the Sufi orders and others. The places where those groups' accounts of Jaʿfar's lessons concur lend a level of historical plausibility to the attribution. There are certainly limitations to this approach as well, but it can be a useful starting point. From that vantage point, one of the elements of Jaʿfar's teachings that truly stand out among others is his emphasis on the authority and reliability of a religious guide from the Prophet's family. While his teachings on the subject likely helped inspire many Sufi understandings of the *murshid,* or *pir,* most Shiʿa groups developed it into the institution of the imamate.

Despite the confusion at Jaʿfar's death regarding whom should be considered the next imam, there was little doubt among his core followers that it was essential to identify and follow the guidance of that person. While there was not yet a Sunni-Shiʿa dichotomy at the time of Jaʿfar's death, the institution of the imamate did help set his followers on paths of interpretations that would privilege the teachings of a specific lineage of men. None of the imams after Jaʿfar would have the kind of widespread, cross-sectarian recognition among other scholars that Jaʿfar enjoyed. They were increasingly isolated to their own communities. And thus, the lineages of the imams, in their various forms, would gradually contribute to distinct traditions of Islamic reasoning and scholarship.

Types of Shiʿism

Contrary to popular perception, Shiʿism is not a single religious tradition, nor can it simply be reduced to a historical dispute over the proper succession of Muhammad. In fact, some scholars of Islam question whether the term Shiʿism is actually useful at all. There have been, and continue to be, diverse lived traditions of Islamic thought and practice. Using the term Shiʿism for some of those Islamic traditions, which has come to be understood as oppositional to Sunni Islamic traditions, may impose an artificial division on the history of Islam that belies the complexity and interconnectedness of Islamic thought. Understanding Shiʿa traditions as something uniquely and fundamentally different from various Sunni traditions was something that gradually developed through

history, though the messy realities of lived religion have always complicated this binary.

The life of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq is a perfect testimony to this complexity. Despite the fact that Jaʿfar is typically considered one of the most important and formative thinkers for Shiʿism, the details of his life situate him squarely in the center of eighth century Islamic thought and tradition (not just the history of Shiʿism). Viewing him through the lens of later Shiʿa traditions, which I have generally tried to avoid in this book, obscures the degree to which he was a product of broader Muslim discourse. Not unlike many of his peers, some of which would be seen as key thinkers in Sunni traditions, Jaʿfar was attempting to make a path through the murky political and theological debates of his day.

But even in centuries long after Jaʿfar, and after the notion of a Sunni Islamic identity emerged in opposition to Shiʿa Islam, there are many well-documented instances of blurred boundaries. There are individual scholars who have participated in the religious and intellectual life of both traditions, and many more lay Muslims who have crossed back and forth or lived somewhere in between. Mixed marriages between Sunni and Shiʿa Muslims have, not surprisingly, often muddled the waters as well. But the complexity is far more substantive than merely a matter of mixing two traditions, as if Sunni and Shiʿa traditions are simply two unique and different forms of Islam. All of the hallmarks of Shiʿa religious thought can be found in many Sunni traditions, including reverence for the *ahl al-bayt,* leadership legitimacy of ʿAlid families, expectations for a *mahdi* to restore global justice, and the adherence to a religious guide for spiritual insights. None of those are unique to Shiʿa communities.

And yet, it would be a mistake to simply pretend that the categories of Sunni and Shiʿa aren't meaningful. Although the binary logic of dividing Islam between Sunni and Shiʿa traditions was a historical development that took centuries to occur, it is still a framework that has impacted and shaped much of Muslim discourse and practice, especially since the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Furthermore, there has been a problematic and pervasive tendency within Western scholarship on Islam to privilege Sunni narratives of Islam, casting them as the "normal" Islam and treating Shiʿism as a sectarian offshoot. But the problem of Sunni-normativity has even deeper roots. Many Shiʿa communities have been very sensi-

tive to the ways in which their interpretations and understandings of Islam have often been cast as heterodox or aberrant, and thus often ignored by Sunni Muslims. For many Shiʿa communities, Shiʿism is an important tradition that warrants study and analysis. Even if it's a problematic categorization, it is one that has become central to the religious thinking of certain Muslim groups.

The most prominent Muslim groups that typically fall under the category of Shiʿism are Zaydis, Ismaʿilis, and Twelvers. Only the Ismaʿilis and Twelvers hold a special place for Jaʿfar in their traditions. As such, they are discussed with more detail below. Zaydis, taking their name from Zayd ibn ʿAli ibn Husayn, are typically considered Shiʿa because they champion the historical right of ʿAli ibn Abi Talib to have been the leader of the Muslim community, the defining feature of the *shiʿat ʿAli* movement. But in most other respects, Zaydi Shiʿism is quite different from Ismaʿili and Twelver Shiʿism. Zaydi Islam is another example of the ambiguous demarcations between Sunni and Shiʿa. Zaydi scholars have not held to the ideas of the imamate the same way as Jaʿfar al-Sadiq and his father. For Zayd ibn ʿAli, Jaʿfar's uncle, the imamate was inherently tied to political leadership. One could not be an imam if he did not lead a rebellion against the unjust and illegitimate Umayyads. Appointment (*nass*) of the next imam, therefore, was irrelevant. Jaʿfar viewed Zayd's claim to the imamate as illegitimate, and vice versa. Zaydi forms of Islam – and there are numerous varieties of Zaydism – thus developed along a significantly different path than the traditions that followed Jaʿfar's leadership. Zaydi legal thought was far more closely aligned with Shafiʿi legal traditions, among Sunni groups, than Ismaʿilis or Twelvers.

Jaʿfar in Ismaʿili Shiʿism

The largest group of Ismaʿili Muslims today regards the contemporary Prince Shah Rahim al-Hussaini, better known as Aga Khan V, as the current imam of the Muslim community. He was recently appointed to the imamate by his father and previous imam, Aga Khan IV, in a decision announced after his death in in February of 2025. Their followers claim the Aga Khan (a title synonymous with "imam" for this community) is a descendent of Prophet Muhammad's family, through the line of Fatima and ʿAli, including Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. This modern imam embodies supreme religious authority and is considered an infallible guide on spiritual matters

Quraysh
'Abd Manaf
'Abd Shams
Hashim
Umayya
'Abd al-Muttalib
Abu al-'As
Harb
Abu Talib
Abu 'Abd Allah
al-'Abbas
Al-Hakam
'Affan
Abu Sufyan
Muhammad the Prophet
Marwan
'Uthman
Mu'awiya
'Ali
Fatima
Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya
Hasan
Husayn
Early Umayyads
'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin
Later Umayyads
Zayd
Muhammad al-Baqir
Ja'far al-Sadiq
Isma'il
Muhammad al-Dibaj
'Abd Allah Al-Aftah
Musa al-Kazim
Muhammad
'Ali al-Rida
'Abbasids
Isma'ilis
Twelver Imams

and interpretations of the Qurʾan. The Ismaʿili Shiʿism under his authority, sometimes referred to as Nizari Ismaʿilis, have become the most well-known and internationally visible group of Ismaʿilis today. The current Aga Khan is the 50th imam for their Muslim community who number in the tens of millions globally. Born in 1971, the Aga Khan V is a British citizen, has degrees in comparative literature and management, and is an immensely wealthy business magnate. Building upon his father's major cultural and religious reforms initiated over the last half century, Aga Khan V is working to extend the imamate's generous philanthropic initiatives throughout the world that have garnered them widespread respect. This vibrant and influential Ismaʿili tradition is part of the legacy of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, but they are not the only Ismaʿilis today who lay claim to a lineage traced to Jaʿfar's son.

Other Ismaʿili communities around the world trace a different lineage of imams that separate them from the Aga Khan's following. Some of these communities, like the Nizaris above, have a living imam continuing that tradition of religious leadership to this day. Others, similar to Twelver Shiʿa Muslims, believe one of the imams supernaturally entered into a time of hiding or concealment known as the *ghayba*, and the community awaits the return of the last imam at a future time in history. The splits that have emerged within the Ismaʿili tradition take us all the way back to the succession dispute following Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's death in 765.

As mentioned previously, and against Jaʿfar's best efforts to reduce the confusion, there was a significant amount of disagreement among Jaʿfar's many followers when his heir-apparent (Ismaʿil) unexpectedly died just a few years before Jaʿfar also passed away. There are reports of numerous interpretations over what happened next. A few seemed to have claimed that Ismaʿil could not have died since he was appointed the heir and that his death was merely an illusion. But most of Jaʿfar's followers looked to his other sons who were also respected in the community and had their own groups of disciples already. Some claimed that Jaʿfar's son, Muhammad b. Jaʿfar al-Dibaj was the next imam. Muhammad didn't share his father's political reservations and later led a rebellion against the ʿAbbasid in 815, resulting in his death. Others claimed the imamate had actually passed on to another of Jaʿfar's son, ʿAbdullah al-Aftah, the oldest son after Ismaʿil. For those who felt the imamate should go to the eldest son of the previous imam,

ʿAbdullah was the natural choice. But ʿAbdullah also passed away unexpectedly just a few months after his father, again leaving segments of the community scrambling to identify the true successor to Jaʿfar's leadership. Most of the followers of ʿAbdullah's brief time as imam claimed the next imam was Jaʿfar's other son, Musa al-Kazim. For Twelver Shiʿa Muslims, as I explain below, Musa came to be regarded as the rightful imam after Jaʿfar.

For the groups known today as Ismaʿilis, they claim the imamate passed from Ismaʿil on to Ismaʿil's son, Muhammad. Nearly two hundred years later, the first major Shiʿa empire would claim their authority through this Muhammad b. Ismaʿil. Known as the Fatimid Empire, the Ismaʿili Shiʿa state had a tremendous impact on the region from their eventual capital in Cairo, Egypt. The Fatimids at times controlled much of North Africa and often parts of Syria as well as the holy cities of Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina. Contemporaries of that day would have been justified in wondering if Ismaʿil's descendants were indeed going to triumph as leaders of the entire Muslim community. The Abbasid authorities in Baghdad felt deeply threatened by the expanding power and prestige of the Ismaʿili Fatimids.

When Jaʿfar's son, Ismaʿil, died in 762, there were at least six groups that emerged with different understandings of who was the next imam after Jaʿfar. The first group to go by the term Ismaʿili actually claimed that Ismaʿil had not died but instead gone into hiding. They felt the reports of Ismaʿil's death were merely to keep him safe from the ʿAbbasid authorities and most of this group understood Ismaʿil to be the final imam, and the *mahdi*, who would reveal himself and restore justice to the world soon. This interpretation found little support and did not endure for long. Instead, most of Ismaʿil's core followers threw their support behind Muhammad b. Ismaʿil who they also claimed was designated by Ja-far al-Sadiq as the next imam following Ismaʿil's death. This early Ismaʿili movement was referred to by many at the time as the Mubarakiyya (a term evoking an epithet of Ismaʿil, meaning "blessed"). But tensions in the family and the threat of ʿAbbasid authorities persuaded Muhammad to leave the Hijaz region and move to a secret location in the east, first in southern Iraq and then later in Persia. From that point onward, very little is known about Muhammad or his descendants. Scattered reports exist, but little can be said with much certainty. Many, if not most, of Mu-

hammad's followers at that time claimed that Muhammad was the *mahdi* and they awaited his appearance, a tradition of Islam known as the Qarmatians. But it was a century later when this nearly forgotten lineage of Jaʿfar's descendants reemerged onto the public stage with impressive results.

By the end of the 9th century, the Qarmatian Ismaʿilis had established an impressive network of secret missionary activities and underground religious communities. The leader of the movement was referred to as the *hujja*, drawing upon the concept championed by Ja-far al-Sadiq. Here, however, the term was used for the leader who guided the community while the imam was in hiding, i.e. - the imam's representative. In 899, the leader of the Qarmatian moment, ʿAbdullah al-Mahdi, made a shocking claim. He announced that he was not merely the representative of Muhammad b. Ismaʿil but the actual imam himself. Living in Syria at the time, ʿAbdullah explained that there had been a secret continuous line of hidden imams and that the accounts of Muhammad b. Ismaʿil as the final imam was merely a way to protect the identity of the real imams. This was a dramatic turn from what most Ismaʿilis had understood up to that point, but ʿAbdullah was already the acknowledged *hujja* and thus had the religious authority to make the claim persuasive. Those who rejected ʿAbdullah's claim continued to be known as Qarmatians, while those who followed the imamate of ʿAbdullah developed the traditions of Ismaʿili thought we know today.

ʿAbdullah would eventually emerge as the recognized founder of the Fatimid Empire following numerous intriguing events in his life, including a journey to North Africa in disguise and a period in prison from which his followers rescued him. As the first caliph of the Fatimid dynasty, later Fatimid scholars would go to lengths to attempt to detail the history and lineage of ʿAbdullah through the hidden imams back to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. For the later Fatimids, ʿAbdullah's lineage had to have reached Ja-far al-Sadiq through Ismaʿil and Muhammad. Ironically, ʿAbdullah's own claims in his letters suggest an even more clandestine history that included numerous switching of names that led his genealogy back to Jaʿfar's al-Sadiq's second son ʿAbdullah, not Ismaʿil. The historical ancestry of the Fatimid caliphs, therefore, has been a subject of dispute for centuries. But the various contrasting Ismaʿili narratives always trace him back to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, arguably the most pivotal figure in Ismaʿili Shiʿism. From the beginning of the Fatimid period, the

caliphs instructed Fatimid scholars to teach and instruct in accordance with Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's teachings.

For nearly three hundred years, Jaʿfar's descendants ruled one of history's great empires and developed a robust tradition of Ismaʿili Shiʿa thought and practice with Jaʿfar's teachings at the center. Some of the most important Ismaʿili scholars of the Fatimid period, people like al-Qadi Nuʿman and Imad al-Din, drew repeatedly and consistently from the wealth of teachings attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. The esoteric insights into the Qurʾan that Jaʿfar espoused was, and remains, a defining characteristic of Ismaʿili thought. Time and again, Jaʿfar served as a reference point for Ismaʿili debates and reasoning. Within Ismaʿli thought, there was ongoing dispute about the identity of the imams after Jaʿfar, as well as later splits among the Ismaʿili lines of imam, but there was never any doubt about it all being traced back to Jaʿfar's authority.

Jaʿfar in Twelver Shiʿism

The largest groups of Shiʿa Muslims today are known as Twelver Shiʿa, so called after a central teaching that there are only twelve imams. Today, most public, and especially political, conversations regarding Sunni and Shiʿa communities in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, for example, are referring to Twelver Shiʿa communities. Although Ismaʿili Shiʿa traditions appeared to be the most successful and enduring form of Shiʿism during the Fatimid period, Twelver Shiʿism was steadily growing in the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries. Later, in the 16th century, a Persian-speaking Sufi leader named Shah Ismaʿil sought to establish his own dynasty in Iran. In so doing, he declared Twelver Shiʿism to be the official interpretation of Islam. The successes of the Safavid empire in the 16th and 17th centuries propelled Twelver Shiʿa thought to a new level of popularity in many regions that remain Shiʿa majority to this day.

Twelver Shiʿa Muslims also trace their lineage of authoritative imams to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, but the question of his successor is again what most notably set them on a different path of interpretation than the Ismaʿili's. Although Ismaʿil and his only full brother, ʿAbdullah, had unique pedigree and were groomed most clearly for the role as successor, Jaʿfar had other sons who were taught and trained in the scholarship of their father. Musa, the son of Hamida, a Berber concubine, had established himself as a family leader and already had a circle of advanced students learning from him. After

the deaths of Ismaʿil and ʿAbdullah, most of Jaʿfar's followers were split between claiming the imamate of Ismaʿil's son Muhammad and the imamate of Musa. After Muhammad b. Ismaʿil left to live secretly in the eastern provinces, Musa remained as the most public family representative.

Honored with the title al-Kazim (the Clement), Musa b. Jaʿfar kept alive his father's and grandfather's roles as scholar and religious guide. Some of the most important early Shi-a theologians and philosophers were students of Musa al-Kazim. Later Twelver Shiʿa Muslims would count Musa al-Kazim as the seventh imam in the lineage of the twelve, though the counting was less agreed upon and more varied at the time. However, none of the imams of this line would again achieve the stable, long-term leadership role comparable to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. Political pressures made it virtually impossible. Musa, for instance, was forcibly moved to Iraq by the ʿAbbasid authorities multiple times, typically being placed under house arrest as well. All of the remaining imams of this line would spend time, sometimes nearly their entire lives, under house arrest, though there were brief interludes of relative freedom from governmental intervention. Disputes over succession after Musa again split the community and more splits occurred at each new generation. The circumstances of the lives of each of these imams cut their lives short and made carrying on family traditions far more challenging. Musa's grandson and great grandson, counted as the ninth and tenth imams, both inherited the imamate as prepubescent children due to their fathers' early deaths.

When the eleventh imam of this line, Hasan al-ʿAskari, died under house arrest in the year 873 or 874, some of his followers shifted their loyalty to Hasan's brother since Hasan had no known sons. Others, however, claimed that Hasan al-ʿAskari had indeed fathered a son, an inheritor of the imamate named Muhammad, but the child had been kept a secret from the ʿAbbasid authorities. He was living in hiding. Through a series of representatives who met with this twelfth imam in secret over the subsequent decades, a network of communities continued to be guided through a veiled leadership. In the year 941, however, it was announced that the twelfth imam had entered a greater state of hiding, or occultation, referred to as the *ghayba,* and that he would return to the public eye at a future God-ordained time. This twelfth imam, in this way, came to be understood at the long-awaited *mahdi* who would

someday return to restore justice and right-guidance to the world.

Twelver Shiʿa Muslims, therefore, have effectively lived without the guidance of a living and present imam since the mid-10th century and continue today to await the eventual return of the *mahdi*. Further, in many ways, this tradition of Shiʿism hasn't enjoyed the unencumbered leadership of any imam since the days of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. TheʿAbbasid interventions in the lives of Jaʿfar's descendants severely limited their ability to provide open and comprehensive instruction and guidance to the broader community for sustained periods of time. Somewhat counter-intuitively, however, this state of affairs contributed to a flourishing of Shiʿa intellectual thought. Shiʿa scholars since the late 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries were forced to work more independently since they often had limited access to the imams of their day. By the time of the full occultation the twelfth imam in 941, a robust school of Shiʿa scholars had emerged and the subsequent generation would take Twelver Shiʿism to new levels of theoretical sophistication and theological systematization.

The Twelver scholars of the 10th and 11th centuries held their ground in public debates from Medina to Aleppo and Baghdad to the eastern reaches of the empire. Though carefully distancing themselves from Ismaʿili Shiʿism (which was associated with the political rivals to the west, the Fatimids), the Twelver scholars shared with Ismaʿilis a central emphasis on the teachings of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. For Twelver Shiʿa Muslims, the authority of the teachings of all twelve imams are as equally reliable as the authority of the Prophet Muhammad. Vast collections of the teachings of all of the imams, alongside accounts of the Prophet, form a critical basis of Shiʿa scholarship. But in reality the role of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq towers over the rest of the imams. In one of the most formative and authoritative Twelver works, Ibn Babawayh's (10th century) collection of teachings of the Prophet and imams, titled *Man la yahduruhu al-faqih,* approximately 60% is credited to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. This starkly contrasts with the Prophet Muhammad (7%) and ʿAli b. Abi Talib (5%). The closest to Jaʿfar is actually Jaʿfar's father, Muhammad al-Baqir, at 15% of the content [Buckley, 38]. This overwhelming preponderance of teachings from Jaʿfar al-Sadiq is common in Twelver sources and again testifies to the incredible impact Jaʿfar has had on Shi-a thought throughout history. Simply, this is the reason the Twelver Shiʿa school of law is commonly referred to as

Jaʿfari law.

The unique contours of Twelver Shiʿa history and thought has impacted the legacy of Jaʿfar in specific ways. Once the notion was settled that there were only twelve imams, after which there were no more until the return of the *mahdi*, the stories of those twelve imams began to take a life of their own. The imams began to function within Twelver Shiʿism as a category rather than as individuals. And the individual characteristics of each historical imam was often transposed onto the other imams such that they increasingly began to be remembered by Shiʿa communities in very similar ways to one another. This trend had specific consequences on the way that Jaʿfar has been remembered with Twelver Shiʿism. First of all, Jaʿfar's erudition, along with his father's, came to be seen as a quality of the imams as a category, which was thus applied to the stories of all twelve imams, inadvertently obscuring the uniquely brilliant career of Jaʿfar. Second, the tragedies that befell many of the imams, from the martyrdoms of ʿAli or Husayn to the political troubles of many of Jaʿfar's descendants, also came to function as a lens through which all of the imams' lives were understood. Jaʿfar's illustrious and successful career as a teacher, scholar, and religious guide is often represented in Twelver sources as suffering tragic fate and not being fully completed. These instances and others can be seen as the result of the systematized Twelver discourse of subsequent centuries rather than a historical reflection of Jaʿfar's life and unique contributions.

Shiʿism and the Memory of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq

The life of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq will always be most closely tied to Shiʿism. The unparalleled impact of his teachings on Ismaʿili and Twelver thought is unsurprising to most Shiʿa Muslims. His name is ubiquitous in Shiʿa communities as he is regularly regarded as central figure in the history of Islamic thought. As I have outlined in the previous chapters, Jaʿfar contributed the development of Islamic thought and practice in a variety of fundamental ways. He was consulted by the most pivotal figures in early Islamic legal discourse, especially in the Medinan circles of the early eighth century, and he helped articulate and popularize foundational concepts of Islamic spirituality and Qurʾanic interpretation at a formative period of Islamic history. He was respected by many and had followers far beyond the boundaries of what might have been consid-

ered Shiʿism in his day.

Throughout this book, I have emphasized the fact that Shiʿism in the 8th century was not a specific religious identity in the same way it would be later. Most Muslim leaders of Jaʿfar's day who did not approve of Umayyad or ʿAbbasid policies held some level of shiʿa inclinations. It appears that most Muslim leaders at the time believed that Muhammad's family, the *ahl al-bayt,* had a special role to play in Islam. Jaʿfar stood at the head of this family and was sought by many for counsel. And yet, later developments of Shiʿism into specific religious traditions (which came to be seen as opposed to Sunni Muslim traditions) meant that Jaʿfar's legacy would take on certain sectarian associations.

Contemporary scholars of Islamic history are still working to trace the transformation of Shiʿism from a vague but common Muslim perspective on rightful authority – one that was focused on justice, spirituality, and legitimate leadership – to a specifically demarcated religious community within Islam characterized by a unique set of theological and doctrinal commitments. And perhaps more important is the ongoing attempt to chart the evolving perceptions of Shiʿism as such. The details of this process lie beyond the scope of this book, but two important events from the ninth century stand out in this regard: the establishment of the Fatimid empire and the Buyid take over of Baghdad. By the year 1000, much of the western lands were under the control of the Fatimids whose new capitol in Cairo was quickly emerging as a preeminent hub of intellectual activity. Further, the Ismaʿili empire had control over the holy cities of Jerusalem, Medina, and Mecca. In the year 946, Persian leaders with overt shiʿa sympathies (mostly of Zaydi and Twelver perspectives) took control of Baghdad. While they kept the ʿAbbasid caliph in place as a symbolic figure, the Buyids threw their support behind Shiʿa scholars and leaders in the region. The effect of this was that Shiʿism was suspiciously associated with foreign powers and political threat to the status quo. By the ninth century, an incredibly prosperous and successful ʿAbbasid polity had been entwined with patronage of the arts, science, and religion. Shiʿa political movements from Egypt and Persia threatened to disrupt the status quo of power.

Furthermore, Shiʿa communities had largely developed a level of popular devotion and admiration for the imams that was off-putting to many non-Shiʿa. Spectacular stories of the imams lives

cultivated a Muslim piety among the Shiʿa that placed great emphasis on love for the imams and their families. By the 10th century, a wide array of miracle stories attributed to the imams were being circulated in Shiʿa circles. Ismaʿili and Twlever Shiʿa communities told stories of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq that adorned him with accounts of a miraculous birth, knowledge of the unseen, abilities to see the future, and fluency in the languages of the world. More fringe Shiʿa groups would attribute a kind divinity to the imams. By the 11th century, a bulwark of Sunni alliances began to emerge that opposed Shiʿa narratives of the imams and effectively built up a kind of Sunni orthodoxy that precluded the reliance upon Shiʿa imams. The centrality of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq in Shiaʿa traditions gave birth to a prevalent Sunni avoidance of him all together. Only the mystics among the Sunni traditions would continue to evoke his name in their lessons. Increasingly, the legacy of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq was left to the memory of the Shiʿa.

Conclusion

Shiʿa devotion and regard for Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, not to mention the enduring authority of his teachings within Shiʿism, ensured that a sizable amount of stories and traditions were preserved about his life. We can find accounts about his birth, his childhood, his wives and children, not to mention his interactions with students, government officials and zealous revolutionaries. We have more stories about Jaʿfar preserved for us than hardly any other figure of his generation. The vast majority of them, however, come to us through the worldview of medieval Shiʿism. Thus the theological interests, doctrinal commitments, and hagiographical concerns of Shiʿa communities have had a tremendous impact on molding the image of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq into the kind of person later Shiʿa communities expected of their imams. In many ways, the stories of Jaʿfar tell us more about later Shiʿa communities than they do about the historical Jaʿfar. Questions that a modern reader might want to know about Jaʿfar, therefore, are very difficult to explore in many of these texts. His motivations, internal struggles, and personal hopes and aspirations are mostly filtered through later centuries of Shiʿa thought and politics. Separating one from the other is fraught.

Locating and getting to know the historical Jaʿfar is arguably more hampered by the plethora of Shiʿa material on him than it is

helped. Any serious attempt to understand the life of Jaʿfar within his historical context necessitates great caution when reading the collections of Shiʿa stories about him. Rather than a compilation of all the Shiʿa accounts of Jaʿfar, we gain the most when we attempt to understand Jaʿfar's life alongside the historical context of his life and the forces that shaped his life.

Selected Quotes Attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq

Jaʿfar often taught his students to heed the counsel and guidance of pious religious leaders. He is recorded saying, for example,

> Take counsel in the matters faith demands of you with one who has the following five qualities: intellect, knowledge, experience, good counsel, and precaution. If you find these five things in a person, then make use of them, be resolute and rely on Allah (SWT).
>
> This will lead you to what is correct.
>
> As for matters of this world which do not pertain to faith, make decisions about them and then do not think about them further. If you do this, you will obtain the blessings of livelihood and the sweetness of obedience.
>
> Knowledge is obtained through consultation. The man of intellect is he who derives new knowledge from consultation, and that guides him to obtain his goal. Consulting a proper counsellor is like reflecting upon the creation of the heavens and the earth and the destruction of both, since the more intense a person's reflection upon these things, the deeper he penetrates into the seas of the light of gnosis and the more he increases his understanding and certainty.
>
> Do not take counsel from someone when your intellect does not give him any credence, even if he is famous for his discernment and scrupulousness. When you take counsel from someone your heart trusts, do not disagree with what he advises even if it is contrary to what you want. [*Lantern,* 85]

Later Shiʿa communities, both Ismaʿili and Twelver, would transmit a large number of teachings attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq regarding the Imamate and the authority of the rightful Imams. Often these accounts seem to reflect theological sensibilities that post-date

the historical Jaʿfar and more developed Shiʿa positions. But it is also possible that they retain elements of Jaʿfar's emphasis on the legitimacy of the appointed Imams.

The great Ismaʿili jurist, al-Qadi al-Nuʿman (d. 974), working for the Fatimid imams of the 10th century, collected several of these statements to attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. Together, they help give us a picture of how Jaʿfar was understood within Ismaʿili traditions as clarifying and authorizing their understanding of the imamate. When Jaʿfar was asked why some of his stories about ʿAli b. Abi Talib differed from what some other Muslim groups said about him, Jaʿfar responded,

> We answered you with nothing but ʿAli's opinion, and we have nothing except what we have passed down, the later of us from the earlier of us. We are the sons of ʿAli, and what we have delivered to you from him is his opinion. [*Disagreements,* 145]

Al-Qadi al-Nuʿman records another instance when a contemporary of Jaʿfar, Sudayr al-Sayrafi, inquires about the basis of the imam's claims. Sudayr notes that some of Jaʿfar's followers claim he "hears a faint sound in his ear," or "that he is inspired," or "that he sees something in his dream" [*Disagreements,* 145]. But Jaʿfar sets the record straight, saying,

> Do not accept any of the things that they say, O Saydar. We are the proof of God and His trustees over His creation. What we consider lawful derives from the Book of God, and what we consider unlawful derives from it as well. [*Disagreements,* 146]

The insistence that imams derive their authority from the Qur'an is rhetorically important and frequently put on display in al-Qadi al-Nuʿman's book. When Jaʿfar was asked about the Qur'an's Sura al-Ra'd verse which states "you are only a warner, and every people has a guide" (13:7), Jaʿfar replied,

> The warner is the Messenger of God, and we are the guides. In every age, there is an Imam from among us who guides the people to what the Messenger of God delivered concerning what they do not know. The first of the guides after the Messenger was ʿAli. God's blessings be upon him.

[*Disagreements,* 54-55]

And when asked to comment on Sura al-Imran's verse, "No one knows its interpretations save God and those firmly rooted in knowledge" (3:7), Jaʿfar replied,

> The Messenger of God is the best of those firmly rooted in knowledge; God taught him all of the Revelation and the Interpretation that He revealed to him, so that nothing was revealed without his knowing its interpretation. The legatees after him who are firmly rooted in knowledge know all of its interpretation. [*Disagreements,* 55]

In the same century that al-Qadi al-Nuʿman was recording these statements for the Ismaʿilis of Egypt, the preeminent Persian Twelver Shiʿa scholar, al-Kulayni (d. 941) was recording even more voluminous accounts attributed to Jaʿfar and the other eleven imams. In his magisterial collection, *al-Kafi* (*The Sufficient*), al-Kulayni compiled over a thousand narrative accounts just on the topic of the authority of the imams. And no imam is cited more in this section than Jaʿfar al-Sadiq who says, for example,

> The earth is never left without an Imam so that if the believers add anything (to the laws of the Shariʿa) it is brought back (to the original form) and if they reduce anything it is completed for them. [Kulayni, I: 154]

And similarly:

> The earth has never been left without a person with Divine Authority who can teach people about the lawful and the unlawful matters, and call them to the path of Allah. [Kulayni, I: 155]

In collections such as this one, premised upon an explicit commitment to emergent Twelver Shiʿa theology, Jaʿfar's claim about the imamate are presented in emphatic and dramatic language. Al-Kulayni recorded him saying about the imams (*a'immah*),

> Allah has made them as cornerstones of the earth so that people on earth are not destroyed. They possess the doubtless Divine Authority over the inhabitants of earth and those below the earth. [Kulayni, I:176]

In many cases, the boundaries between Twelver Shiʿa Muslims and all other Muslims were defined in words attributed to Jaʿfar:

> We are the ones obedience to whom is obligatory by the commands of Allah. People have no other choice except to recognize us. They will not be excused for not recognizing us. Those who recognize us are the true believers; and those who refuse to acknowledge our Divine Authority are unbelievers. Those who do not recognize us and do not reject us are straying and lost, until they return to guidance and affirm the fact that Allah as made obedience to us obligatory. However, if they die in their straying condition, Allah will deal with them the way He would will. [Kulayni, I: 165]

The detailed accounts of the imams (*a'immah*) often ascribed to Jaʿfar have remained doctrinal reference points for Twelver Shiʿa Muslims for over a millennium now. To provide a sense of the full detail of these narratives within the Twelver tradition, I provide here a full sermon attributed to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on the topic of the imams:

> Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, has explained His religion through *'A'immah* [the imams] of (true) guidance from the family of our Prophet, *'alayhi al-salam,* the *Ahl al-Bayt*, *'alayhim al-salam,* and has cleared through them the path of His system and plan. He has opened through them the inside of the springs of His knowledge. Whoever of the followers of Muhammad, *'alayhi al-salam*, has recognized his obligation toward the rights of his Imam, has realized the taste of the sweetness of his belief and the superior beauty of his Islam. It is because Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, has appointed the Imam as torchbearer for His creatures and authority over those who receive His blessings in His world. He has crowned him with dignity and has encompassed him in the light of His Omnipotence that extends for him a means to the heavens. He does not discontinue His blessings for him. None of the things with Allah is achieved except through its right means. Allah does not accept good deeds of His servants without their recognition of the Imam, *'alayhi al-salam.* The Imam, *'alayhi al-salam*, knows how to sort out the dark confusing matters and things that may obscure the *Sunnah* (tradition of the Holy Prophet, *'alayhi al-salam*) and the confound-

ing matters in mischievous conditions. Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, has always chosen *'A'immah* from the descendants of al-Husayn, *'alayhi al-salam*, one after the other Imam. He would select and choose them for the leadership of His creatures delightfully and well satisfied with them. Whenever one Imam would leave this world he would appoint for His creatures his successor as a clear beacon and a shining guide, a guarding leader, and a knowledgeable one with Divine Authority. *'A'immah* from Allah guide people with truth and with the truth they judge. They are Allah's authority calling people to Him, and shepherds of His creatures. With their guidance people follow the religion and form them the land receives light. Through their holiness the bounties increase. Allah has made them life for the people and the torches in the darkness, the keys to communication and the strongholds for Islam. Thus, have the measures of Allah continued in them towards His final decision.

The Imam, *'alayhi al-salam*, is the outstanding amicable one; the most trusted guide and the guardian who can make hopes come true. Allah has chosen him with such distinctions. He selected him as such (well protected) in the realm when all things were in the form of particles in the instant that He made him. He chose him as such (well protected) in the realm in which all things were designed as He had designed him as a shadow, before He made the organisms, on the right side of His throne, gifted him with wisdom in the unseen knowledge with Him. He chose him in His knowledge and granted him outstanding nobility for his purity.

He is an heir of Adam, the best among the descendants of Noah, the chosen one of the family of Abraham, a descendant of Ishmael and the most preferred ones in the family of Prophet Muhammad, *'alayhi al-salam*. He has always been looked after by the watchful eyes of Allah Who provides him security and guards him with His shield, well protected against the evil nets of Satan and his armies. He is well defended against the approaching dark nights and the false accusations of the evildoers. All wickedness is kept away from him and he is kept safe against all forms of defects and flaws. He is veiled against all scourges.

He is infallible in matters of sins. He is kept safe and sound against all indecencies. He is well known for his forbearance and virtuousness in the early days of his life. Chastity, great knowledge and excellence are ascribed to him toward the end of his life. The task of Imamat (Leadership with Divine Authority) of his father rests with him, while in the lifetime of his father he remains silent.

When the time of the Imamat of his father ends it is the time when the measure of Allah ends up with him due to His wish. The will of Allah brings him to His love, thus, the end of the Imamat of his father comes and he passes away. The Authority from Allah shifts to him after his father. He then is made the person in charge of His religion, the Divine Authority over His servants, the guardian over His lands, he is supported with His spirit and is given of His knowledge. He raises him as a beacon for His creatures, makes him to have His Authority over the people of His world and as the light for the people of His religion and a guardian for His servants. Allah agrees to have him as Imam of the people, entrusts him with His secret, makes him a safe-keeper of His knowledge and hides His wisdom in him. He protects him for His religion, calls upon him to serve His great task, and revives through him the phases of His system (of religion) and the obligations in His laws.

The Imam then enforces justice – when the people of ignorance are confused and the disputing and quarrelling people are frustrated – with shining light, the beneficial cure and radiant truth. He does so with clear explanations of all aspects and exactly in the manner and practice his truthful father and forefathers would do before him. No one ignores the rights of such a scholar except the wicked ones. No one refuses and denies him except those who have strayed away from the right path. No one keeps away from him except those who are aggressive against Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High. [Kulayni, I: 184-185]

Conclusion: Reading Jaʿfar Today

> [Jaʿfar al-Sadiq] was the exemplar for all the masters, and everyone relied on him. He was the perfect model, the shaykh of all the men of God, and the imam of all the followers of Mohammad. He was both the leader of the adherents of intuition and the guide of the adherents of love. He took precedence among the believers and was honored by the ascetics as well. He was outstanding in recording inner truths and without peer in the fine points of the inner mysteries of revelation and exegesis.
>
> Farid al-Din ʿAttar [ʿAttar, 46-47]

Although Jaʿfar al-Sadiq is relatively unknown to most English speakers today, scholars of European history are not entirely unfamiliar with Jaʿfar's name. Interestingly, however, Jaʿfar was not regarded in Europe for his impact on Shiʿism or hardly any other topic that I cover in this book. Rather, he was known through the extensive writings of one of his most famous students, Jabir ibn Hayyan. The many treatises of Jabir (often written "Geber" in the Latinized European languages) were translated into Latin and other European languages in the medieval period and had a significant impact on European scientists. Throughout those works, circulated and read in Europe for centuries, he unequivocally attributed all of his ideas to Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, often claiming to have merely transmitted the exact teachings of Jaʿfar.

The intellectual links between Jabir ibn Hayyan (and by extension, Jaʿfar) and early modern scientific discoveries is a curious chapter in the history of science. Many foundational European discoveries in chemistry and physics actually emerged out of the search for the fabled "Philosopher's Stone." Stories of the Philosopher's Stone helped shape the cultural imagination of European intellectual history, but it was fundamentally a concept born out of the study of alchemy. Often simply glossed as a pre-scientific attempt to turn metals into gold, alchemy was also a broad search for knowledge. More specifically, alchemy was the study of how to

transform the properties of given objects and, by extension, how to make physical and spiritual entities more perfect. The highly-sought Philosopher's Stone was believed to be a substance that could heal wounds, prevent disease, and perhaps even impart immortality.

The term alchemy (itself likely derived from the Arabic term *al-kimiya*) is also where the term for chemistry is derived. But the impact of alchemy goes far beyond the etymologies of words. Early notions of alchemy are found in ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Indian sources and traditions. But it was Arabic Muslim developments upon these traditions that uniquely impacted medieval European scholarship. Jabir ibn Hayyan, above all others, came to be known in Europe as the "father of alchemy" and his many treatises began to be translated into European languages in the twelfth century, eventually making a tremendous impact on the European academy including the ideas of Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Paracelsus. Alchemy would later inherit a reputation of superstition and pseudo-science that distanced the development of chemistry, for example, from alchemy. For much of European history, however, the two terms alchemy and chemistry were synonyms and even early modern thinkers such as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton are now known to have relied heavily upon the study of alchemy, especially the works of Jabir ibn Hayyan.

The research and findings of Arab alchemists such as Jabir ibn Hayyan was not just a study of physical properties but was also connected to the spiritual quest for perfection. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian mystics would draw heavily upon the philosophical ideas and metaphorical images of alchemists like Jabir as they contemplated the very meaning of the universe.

It would be very tempting, based on Jabir's stated reliance upon Jaʿfar al-Sadiq and Jabir's veritable impact on European intellectual history, to claim that Jaʿfar al-Sadiq is the inspiration for many ideas and discoveries that so impacted European scholarship. But like most grand and sweeping claims of history, this one also needs to be cautiously reassessed. There are problems with drawing a simple link between Jaʿfar al-Sadiq and European chemistry and physics. First of all, much of what has been attributed to Jabir in medieval European scholarship is now believed to be the product of later scholars. This has been referred to as the "Geber Problem." Most notably, the single most influential work attribut-

ed to Jabir historically, *The Sum of Perfection*, is now widely regarded to be a product of a 13th European alchemist. Many of Jabir's other works have been called into question as well. In fact, Paul Kraus, one of the most influential scholars on the topic, has argued that there may not be any works actually composed by the historical Jabir ibn Hayyan.

Perhaps the connection between Jaʿfar al-Sadiq and Jabir ibn Hayyan to the formative ideas of alchemy that shaped later scientific research has no historical basis and is merely the accident of false ascriptions. On the other hand, more recent research has made a case that many of the works, though certainly not all, may indeed be the product of Jabir, a student of Jaʿfar [Haq, 10-21]. Regardless of the answers around the intriguing mysteries of Jabir ibn Hayyan, this example nicely illustrates the significant challenge of determining the historical facts of Jaʿfar's life. Nearly every statement that I have made in this book about Jaʿfar al-Sadiq could be contested by others. While most Muslim groups have praised Jaʿfar for his integrity and scholarship, there is immense disagreement over what the historical Jaʿfar really believed or taught. The fact that there is a relatively large amount of historical sources on Jaʿfar's life makes the problem even more acute.

Modern Tensions

It bears repeating that many Muslims pride themselves on avoiding designating themselves as Sunni or Shiʿa and often prefer to claim a common Muslim identity. Completely ignoring the differences, however, is often a privilege of the majority. In this case, it's far easier for Sunni Muslims (about 85% of Muslims globally) to claim that Sunni and Shiʿa boundaries as insignificant. Where the majority of Muslims are Sunni, the default mode of Muslim expression typically reflects Sunni traditions and interpretations. And as such, Shiʿa Muslims tend to be far more aware of the differences and how to navigate their way around Sunni and Shiʿa spaces of worship. For many Sunni Muslims, it can be quite surprising to encounter Shiʿa majority communities and to see that there are often some important differences, or, alternatively, to find what they have heard about Shiʿism may be inaccurate. Explicit sectarian engagements, however, remain tinged with controversy.

A notable example of the way polemics have continued to shape these discussions is the story of the 1980's Tunisian religious

scholar named Muhammad al-Tijani al-Samawi who converted to Shiʿism. In the early 90's, he published his memoir which detailed his journey from a Maliki Sunni upbringing to embracing a Twelver Shiʿa perspective. In the work, *Then I Was Guided* (*Thumma ihtadayt*), al-Tijani walks the reader through his process of learning about Shiʿism and confronting his own misconceptions of Islamic history. Through a chance encounter with a Shiʿa traveler on a boat ride and later meeting with Shiʿa scholars in Najaf, Iraq, the author came to be persuaded of mainstream Twelver Shiʿa claims. The book was met with vigorous debate and criticism and has been banned in some countries. Al-Tijani followed with several additional books, mostly further defenses of Shiʿism, that have won him wide acclaim in Shiʿa circles and severe criticism among some Sunnis.

In one of the pivotal moments of the book's narrative, al-Tijani relates a conversation he had with some scholars in Najaf. After he informed them that communities in Tunisia followed the Maliki school of thought, his Shiʿa hosts claimed that Malik b. Anas (the eponymous founder of Maliki law) had been a student of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. They built upon this assertion, coupled with a similar claim that Jaʿfar also taught Abu Hanifah for some time, to argue the major Sunni schools of law are indebted to the scholarship of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. Extending the logic, the Shiʿa hosts suggested following the teachings of Jaʿfar himself rather than some of his students would be wise. When you add the fact that al-Shafiʿi studied Malik b. Anas's teachings, apologists extend their claim of Jaʿfar's superiority to three of the four Sunni schools of law: Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafiʿi. This kind of rhetorical strategy for Shiʿa preachers has been common for a long time and al-Tijani eventually came to be persuaded by it. As a result, a key part of al-Tijani's case in his book, *Then I Was Guided,* is based upon claims of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's superior scholarship and authority.

In contrast to al-Tijani's narrative, I have already presented what I believe is a more plausible way of thinking about the relationship between Jaʿfar and the Sunni schools of law. There is clearly some truth to the positions al-Tijani heard from his Shiʿa friends, but they are also overstated and forced into a particular rhetorical direction. The centrality of this argument in al-Tijani's book, however, points to what is at stake in the question. Asserting that the masters of the major Sunni schools of law were dependent

upon Jaʿfar's teachings is seen by many Shiʿa Muslims as evidence of Shiʿism's superior legitimacy over Sunni traditions. This is the basis of al-Tijani's apologetic logic and the presumed reason for his conversion. As there have been in centuries past, adamant rebuttals by various Sunni scholars have been put forth to reject such claims about Jaʿfar.

Today, however, both sides of these types of arguments inhabit public space like never before in history. Al-Tijani's Arabic book was translated into Urdu and English in the early 2000's (going through several reprints since) and contentious arguments over the role of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq now play out in virtual spaces online. Some years ago, a (now-defunct) Sunni website, ansar.org, published a thorough refutation of al-Tijani's book, taking special care to adamantly assert that al-Tijani and Shiʿa scholars were lying about Abu Hanifa having learned from Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. In response to the Sunni polemics of ansar.org on this topic and others, a Shiʿa website emerged to refute the positions and defend Shiʿism, plainly titled answering-ansar.org. Among the many other topics, their defense of al-Tijani's claims about Jaʿfar al-Sadiq can be found on their renamed website, shiapen.com. At some point there was yet another site giving separate counter rebuttals called answering-answering-ansar.org.

The back and forth of the online arguments regarding Jaʿfar al-Sadiq are, in some ways, no more than a recycling of much longer debates and controversies that remind us of the enduring nature of religious identities. In other ways, however, it's a microcosm of a much larger question over how the internet has transformed modern societies and religions. The fact that these online debates, often by anonymous posters of uncertain qualifications, reach so many people around the world speaks to the deep impact the internet has had on how religious authority and legitimacy is conceptualized.

Hidden Potential

It would be easy to characterize Jaʿfar al-Sadiq as a person whose legacy marks profound divisions between Muslim groups. One of the preeminent scholars of Islamic history, Marshall Hodgson, influentially penned an article asking the question (and titled), "How did the Early Shiʿa Become Sectarian?" In it, Hodgson focused on the teachings of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq and the role those teachings had for

setting the shiʿa movement on its own course of development. It's not uncommon to hear of Jaʿfar referred to as a founder of Shiʿism. Indeed, there is no reason to question the central and pivotal role of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq for how later Shiʿa communities constructed their religious ideas and doctrines. Hodgson emphasized the doctrines of *nass* (designation of a successor) and Jaʿfar's emphasis on the reliable knowledge (*ʿilm*) possessed by the spiritual guide as two things that set separated the shiʿa from other Muslims. But as I've emphasized in this book, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq was not just an imam for the shiʿa movement, but a formative figure for broader Islamic history whose legacy should not be restricted to the lens of Sunni and Shiʿa divisions. His focus on spiritual knowledge and designation of a successor was not, within his own context, a way to separate off the Shiʿa or even to solve a uniquely Shiʿa problem. Rather, Jaʿfar was addressing broader concerns about proper religious authority and guidance that all Muslim scholars were wrestling with at the time. Once we stop viewing Jaʿfar exclusively through the lens of Shiʿism, we gain some unique potential for helping us think about divisions and sects in Islam in new ways.

In one of the Jaʿfar's speeches, he is recorded saying, "Should I not advise you on the most important things God expects of His creation? [They are] to treat people equitably in their dealings, to show patience with the brethren in faith, and to remember God at all times" [*Amali,* 195]. It's worth pausing on this quote for a moment. Here Jaʿfar prioritized three things before all else: treating people fairly, caring for people, and remembering God. These kinds of simple formulas that focus on core ethical concerns were common in Jaʿfar's teachings. In our search to identify the historical significance of Jaʿfar's life, it is tempting to focus on events or teachings that may have contributed to specific schools of thought, whether that is specific schools of law, Sufi orders, or Shiʿa traditions. But much of Jaʿfar's life and his teachings were not unique to any group that may have later developed, and were rather part of the mainstream Muslim discourse on piety, ethics, spirituality, medicine, and much more.

By acknowledging that the categories of "Sunni," "Sufi," and even "Shiʿa" (in the sense it came to be understood) were not a part of Jaʿfar's life, we actually catch a glimpse of the vibrant and robust religious discourse that characterized early Muslim history before the debates manifested into sectarianism. In the life of

Jaʿfar, we can see simultaneously concepts that would be expanded upon by various groups of later centuries and how those concepts were a part of mainstream Muslim scholarship in an organic and dynamic manner. And in that sense, I believe we can read Jaʿfar's religious and spiritual insights as important manifestations of one of Islam's great thinkers of history.

Trying to free Jaʿfar's legacy from the polarizing politics of Sunni-Shiʿa debates, is not a novel concept. At the end of the 12th century, when Farid al-Din ʿAttar wrote his praise of Jaʿfar, he used it as an opportunity to express his frustration with the perceived divide between Sunni and Shiʿa communities. He wrote,

> I am amazed by those people who have the idea that there is some difference between the followers of the traditions and consensus [i.e., Sunnis] and the followers of the Prophet's family [i.e., Shiʿa] .... I cannot believe that anyone is caught up in this vain fancy. I believe that anyone who has faith in Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him and his family), but has not faith in his offspring and family really has no faith in Muhammad. [ʿAttar, 47]

For ʿAttar, the pious life of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq offered an opportunity to explore the artificial nature of Sunni and Shiʿa divisions. Jaʿfar's legacy offered a vision of Islam that spoke to the needs of all Muslim communities. And his legacy continues to offer that potential today as well.

Unlike many of Jaʿfar's contemporaries, the challenge with sorting out the historical life of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq is not that we have too few sources, but that there are so many stories from such a variety of groups that have admired him through their own narratives of Islam. Hearing Jaʿfar on his own terms may be an impossible task. Sunni scholars of law, Ismaʿili preachers, Twelver theologians, Sufi mystics, and medieval alchemists (just to name a few) have all had different claims on Jaʿfar. Attempting to reconcile all of these visions to one another would only produce a confused collage of identities that all developed after the lifetime of Jaʿfar.

And yet it is compelling to attempt to make some sense out of the accounts of Jaʿfar's unique and memorable life. While there is immense space for interpretation, we can gain a general image of Jaʿfar when we focus on locating him with his historical context. With some basic strategies for sorting through the sources, we find

a man devoted to quiet piety before God and persistent care for his community. If we take Jaʿfar at his word and read him in his context, his life stands beyond the later divisions of Islamic history. He clearly respected his ancestors, which included Abu Bakr. In fact, one of Jaʿfar's own son's was later accused of being Sunni. Jaʿfar was a guide for any who wanted knowledge from the family of the Prophet, a desire shared by most Muslims, not exclusively those who identify as Shiʿa. His piety can, therefore, continue to provide insights into the development of Islam and the spirituality of early Muslim communities.

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Further Reading

An indispensable starting point for any research on Jaʿfar al-Sadiq is Arzina Lalani's bibliography on the topic available online in *Oxford Bibliographies*. For more in depth research, the only extensive English-language scholarly survey of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq is the recent book by Hossein Modarressi, *Text and Interpretation: Imam Jaʿfar al-Sādiq and His Legacy in Islamic Law.* The following abbreviated selection of works, in addition to those in the Works Cited list, will be helpful for those general readers who would like to learn more about the life, context, and legacy of Jaʿfar al-Sadiq.

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